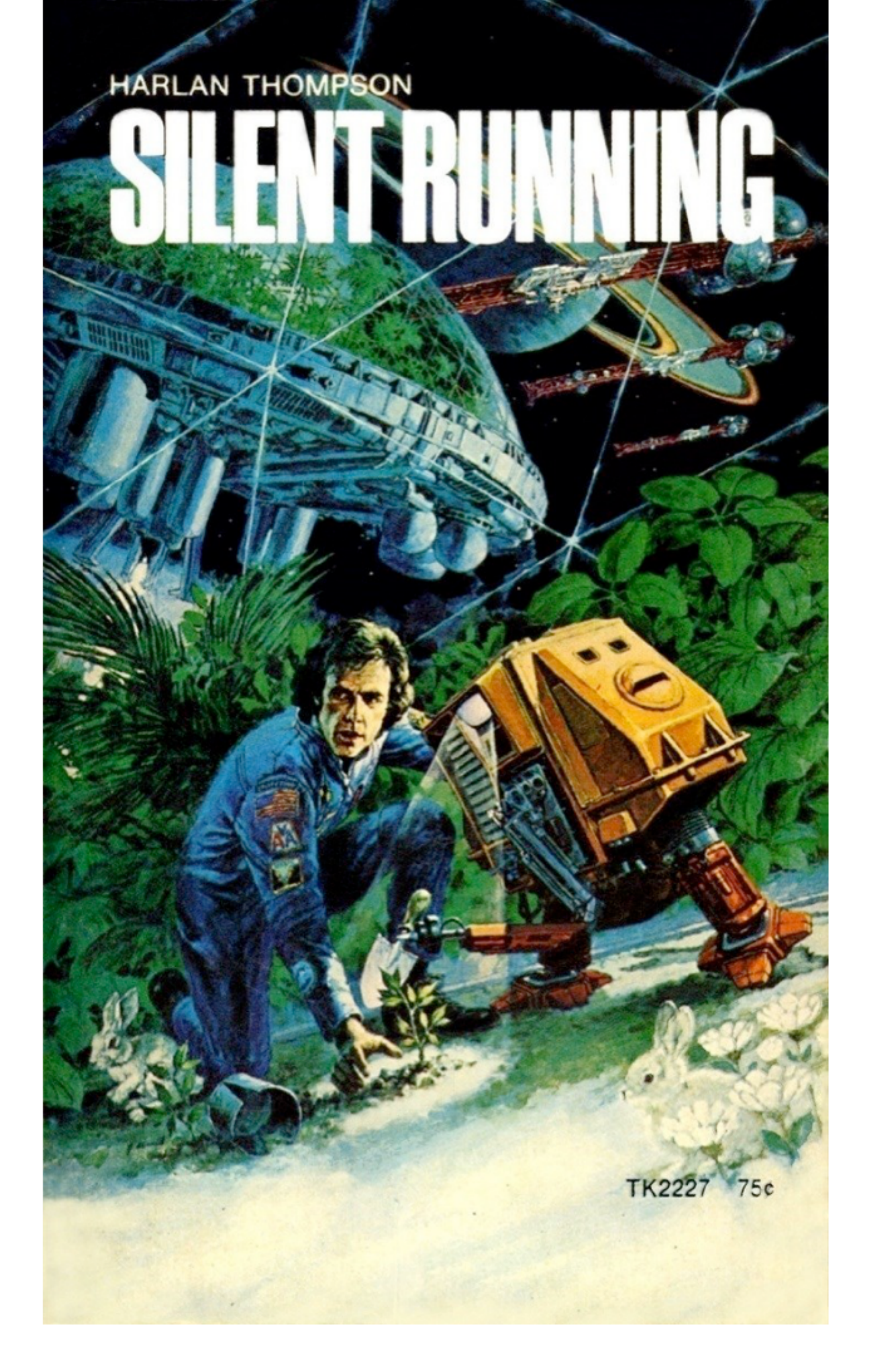

HARLAN THOMPSON
SILENT RUNNING
TK2227 75¢

SILENT RUNNING

The great ship plunges on through the tides of space. Inside, an anguished man ponders what to do. Unless he murders his friends, the children of Earth are doomed to an eternity of sterile dust. Never again will flowers bud and blossom. Never again will arching trees shade and shelter. And if he kills his shipmates, what then? Marooned in outer space, *will* there be a future for him or the forest?

A fantastic look at the world *beyond* 2001!

The great ship plunges on through space. Inside, an anguished man ponders his alternatives. Shall he murder his friends or murder the forest? Are there other options? He must decide quickly . . . time is running out.

HARLAN THOMPSON

SILENT RUNNING

Based on the screen story and the screenplay by
Mike Cimino, Deric Washburn, and Steven Bochco



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TO MY WIFE, GAIL, WITH LOVE

SILENT RUNNING

ONE

In eerie silence the giant spaceship, *Valley Forge,* plunged through weightlessness on its way to orbit the sun. Light shone down on the craft, searching the metal body, streaming through the transparent latticed canopy of Dome One, bringing vibrant life to the forest of young trees and plants.

Beneath the canopy of Dome One, blades of grass rippled in a slight breeze. Forest noises filled the air, along with the faint sounds of falling water.

A huge caterpillar munched on a vast leaf, as a sprinkle of water hit, splashed, then slid down the stem. The sounds of water increased.

Standing waist-deep in a small, lovely pond, Freeman Lowell splashed around, whistling an old tune. He was deeply happy and at home in the forest, and intimate with all of its secrets. He was vitally concerned with every detail of this growing, developing forest of young trees and plants, of insects and small animals.

For one day a voice would take *Valley Forge's* forests back to Earth, as well as those of *Berkshire* and *Sequoia* riding orbit with it. New trees would be planted, and shrubs and flowers set out. The dying, polluted Earth would be saved.

Lowell, lean and brown, dived beneath the falls that fed the pool, then eased his lithe body to the bank to dress. He wandered along a slatted pathway, watering a group of dense tropical ferns. Lowell had a lean, ascetic face, intense blue eyes, and a warm smile that came most often when working in his forest.

Whistling the same tune, he slowly proceeded along the path to a little patch of grass. Stooping down he cuddled a black and white rabbit in his arms, stroking its ears.

"How are you today, hunh—feelin' good?" He fished in his pocket. "I'll bet you'd like something to eat, wouldn't you?"

He fished deeper. "Here, I've got something in my pocket. Here, some goodies." He spread his hand containing a few nuts. "Here, I'll set the table for you. That's good!"

Putting the rabbit gently on the grass, he moved on among the various trees and plants that had little plaques mounted in the ground beside them. The markers specifically identified them, and their country of origin.

Lowell spotted something and bent to look more closely. He

lovingly and gently inspected a delicate flower for possible damage. Satisfied finally, he smelled its fragrance with delight.

He straightened and looked around him at the immense forest.

Lowell was dwarfed beneath tall reeds and bamboo trees. He looked up at the huge geodesic roof which enclosed the forest.

Stars shone brightly outside and a cluster of lights near the dome's peak illuminated the foliage with eerily beautiful shafts of Rembrandt-like lighting. It must be night, he decided.

Around him now worked little drones, Litton-Radclifie L.R. 260's. They were dwarflike metal robots about three feet high. They had a window for an eye and just below it a lens. From just beneath the lens, a motorized arm worked back and forth while they moved around the hull on short stumps of legs, obeying their programed orders.

Lowell paid them no attention.

From a distance, Lowell suddenly heard the whine of engines and the screech of rubber tires rounding a corner. The sound was hollow, as though in a long tube, and it was growing louder. Lowell swung to face it with a look of anger.

All at once, three small rubber-tired vehicles raced from the mouth of the tunnel connecting Dome One with *Valley Forge's* cargo hold. They were driven by three young men. Clean-shaven with crew cuts, they were dressed in jumpsuit-type uniforms similar to Lowell's. But there the similarity ended.

They hooted and yelled as they approached Lowell standing in their path. They were Keenan and Barker, who were quite young, and Wolf, somewhat older.

Marty Keenan led the rest. He was thin and dark with flashing blue eyes and a cynical mouth. "Hey, Flowerface!" He yelled, cutting close to Lowell, "Get out of my way!"

Lowell glanced protectively at his plants. "Careful!" he cautioned, then tried to hold his ground as Keenan raced past.

Barker swerved his car, missed Lowell and ran headlong into a long row of broad-leafed plants.

Andy Barker was heavier than Keenan. His face was regular, his eyes a smoldering brown and his lips full. He hated the whole project, and lived for the day when he could go back to Earth and Los Angeles, and cars, cars, cars.

The third car, driven by Wolf—heavyset and alert, with a ruddy face—took the turn too wide and side-drifted into a small flower bed. His left front wheel crushed the flower that Lowell had earlier bent to examine.

“Wahoo!” Keenan yelled, waving his hat and grinning at Lowell.

Lowell brought a hand up to his shocked eyes. “That’s enough!” he burst out. He grabbed a rake and headed for his tormentor.

Keenan barely regained his traction in time to avoid Lowell, then his car lurched forward.

Barker’s car, which had narrowly missed Lowell, maneuvered out of the ruined plants.

“Olé!” he called and started away.

Lowell reached for a nearby rake and flung it at Barker’s receding back. Anger overwhelmed him.

John Wolf, not so rowdy as Keenan and Barker, slowed his car and stepped out.

“Nice try, Lowell,” he said, watching Keenan speed away. “You almost got him.”

“Damn it, Wolf,” Lowell swung to him. “Can’t you keep those two guys out of my garden?”

Wolf, big-boned, rather somber, smiled slightly. His brown luminous eyes fell on Lowell’s. Secretly he admired Lowell, without quite realizing why he should be so uptight about a forest.

“Okay, I’ll try to head them off next time—Hey!” He bent to examine something at his feet. “These cantaloupes are really coming along!”

Lowell’s long angular face softened. He smiled back.

“Thanks—I wish you’d try some. They’re really special.”

Again came the whine of motors.

Keenan was racing at the final turn before the tunnel neck and neck with Barker. Keenan made it first into the tunnel, forcing Barker headlong into a deep bed of rare ferns. Barker quickly reversed, tearing out more foliage, then sped into the tunnel, his engine whining hungrily.

A drone moved past Lowell, moving mechanically, toward the damaged area.

Wordlessly, Wolf climbed into his car and drove toward the tunnel.

Lowell too made his way along the path to enter the tunnel and walk through it to the cargo area. He moved past row on row of module cargo containers, coded and marked and towering thirty feet to the ceiling.

Before him Barker and Keenan still raced madly around the cargo area, their engines whining electrically, their tires screeching. They yelled and whooped at each other in crazy glee.

“Hey!” Barker yelled to Keenan, with a look toward Lowell. “Did

you see him throw that rake?"

Keenan nodded. "Yeah. He'll go nuts when he sees your water hazard in Dome 6."

But finally their race began to lag as their spirits dampened. Climbing from their cars, they seemed to feel a little guilty.

Wolf drove up and got out, then faced the two boys. "Don't you guys think you should lay off a little?"

Barker grinned sheepishly. "Aw, we were just having some fun."

"What else is there to do?" demanded Keenan.

"Well," Wolf faced him soberly, "this isn't supposed to be a vacation."

Keenan motioned toward two drones working over an empty cargo module, lifting it to a place on the rack above them. "With those little guys and others like them around, I don't know why they need us at all."

Barker's face mirrored an edginess, apparent in them all. "We've been up here in space six months, Wolfie, with another six to go. Doesn't that get to you at all?"

Wolf's face softened. "Okay, but stay out of Lowell's cantaloupes, will you?"

Barker leaned into his car and brought out a cantaloupe, tossing it to Wolf, exclaiming, "Ugh! What do I do with this?"

Wolf caught it. "You're supposed to eat 'em, not play with them." He smiled broadly and turned toward the stairway, continuing, "Don't you know that fresh fruit puts zip in you?" He lobbed the cantaloupe back to Barker but the throw was over his head. The cantaloupe landed with a "splat!" and burst open, exposing its ripe insides.

Laughing, the three men, followed by a serious Lowell, walked up a stairway leading to the command and living quarters directly above the cargo hold.

On the stairs Barker pointed to some dirt and grimaced, saying under his breath, "Lowell's manury boots again."

"Yeah," Keenan nodded. "He ought to be more careful. We all have to live here."

Lowell said nothing. His face softened toward them. They were good kids. It was just that he was so engrossed in his work.

They all walked down a long corridor, conversing. They passed a drone which automatically moved out of their way.

"You know, Wolfie," Keenan said, "with a little luck when we get back, they might condemn this old tub and sell it for scrap."

Wolf slapped the wall affectionately. "Who'd buy it?"

“Lowell, then he wouldn’t have to keep re-enlisting,” Keenan shot back.

Wolf shook his head, then lowering his voice, went on, “Lowell’s had eight years in precise orbit around the sun—with no women, not even men, to talk to about his plants.”

Keenan nodded. “Yeah, he gave me a ring-a-ding speech this a.m. about how they’re getting ready to refoliate the earth with these very forests.”

“Yes,” Barker nodded. “Me, too. They’ll do it with the six forests under *Valley Forge* domes, six of *Berkshire* and six of the same from *Sequoia,* both orbiting in formation beside us.” Barker paused, then added, “At least that’s his story.”

Lowell seemed almost not to hear their scoffing talk. Glancing from his window he could see *Berkshire* and *Sequoia,* sister ships of *Valley Forge,* right out there sailing along. His face became transfigured. He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it to follow the others into a recreation room.

Wolf and Keenan, still chattering, flopped on their couches. Lowell methodically sat down at a table and began making some notes in a thick black book labeled, JOURNAL.

Barker walked over to the versatron and adjusted a mechanical playing arm. The versatron was a sort of pool table except that it possessed a playing arm that could be set. It could be made very difficult or easy, at the whim of the player. Now Barker had set it for an expert.

“How many times,” Barker turned to Keenan, “has this thing beaten you?”

Keenan grinned. What he really wanted to do was get back to New York, get his Porsche, and run up Storm King Highway to his dad’s estate. He wanted to look out over the Hudson River, polluted as it was by his dad’s paper mill, see hundreds of acres of land and say, “Some day this will be mine to blow.”

Now he eyed Barker and said sharply, “It’s adjusted too fast and you know it. Bark! Bark!”

He was kidding but his voice had an edge.

“Yeah!” Barker said.

“Yeah!” Keenan nodded.

They were just making fun, but back of it lay the boredom, the uneasiness of wondering when they’d be called back to Earth.

Suddenly the dam burst within them. Keenan leaped up. Barker came for him. They locked in a wild embrace trying to throw one another to the floor. Chairs flew.

Lowell's table skidded with Barker's flying foot. His journal flew under the couch as though it had wings.

The two men—Keenan in his navy-blue jumpsuit and Barker in white—locked tight. In the silence of the streaming ship, they grunted and strained. Sweat stood out on their faces.

They dropped to the floor. First Keenan was pinned, then Barker. At length they began to laugh, and rose to spring apart and laugh some more.

"Kid stuff!" Wolf told Lowell.

Lowell, whose father had been the eminent Californian, Dr. Clayton Lowell, world-renowned authority on air-borne infections, nodded understandingly. Silently he rose and recovered his journal from beneath the couch. Righting the table he sat down.

"Kid stuff!" But it told too much. Fervently he hoped a voice from Earth would summon *Valley Forge* and *Berkshire* and *Sequoia.* It must soon be time to replant. It had to come sometime. Why not now?

Keenan, still puffing, grinned at Barker, then jerked a thumb toward Lowell. "There's one guy here who can really play the versatron."

"With lots of time to practice," Wolf added.

It was clear to all that while the versatron was a sort of billiards, it was much harder to master.

Barker adjusted its speed to very slow, then swung back to Keenan. "How about that now? Think you can handle it?" Everybody, including Lowell, laughed.

Suddenly at the door a drone appeared with an armload of vegetables and melons. It was obvious that he'd been programed to deliver them.

Lowell moved eagerly forward to take them, then walked slowly through the recreation room door and down a corridor toward the kitchen.

Wolf called after him, "Hey, Lowell, how about a little game of poker?"

"Maybe later," Lowell called back and moved on. Entering the kitchen, he walked past the table to put the vegetables in the sink. He turned on the water, punched a button on the wall with his elbow and began to wash the vegetables while the window in front of him silently beckoned him to an incredible panoramic view of the night sky.

Lowell gazed out while washing the vegetables, and suddenly the public address system came to pulsating life with a rush of static and the shrill beep of a bosun's whistle as it readied itself for an announcement.

Lowell went on washing the vegetables, even though he glanced out of the window now and then to catch a glimpse of the mighty *Berkshire* riding parallel orbit. On its hull he saw a huge painted American flag, and a fifty-foot-high sign reading:

U.S.A.
NORTHEAST DECIDUOUS
(WARREN)
BERKSHIRE SECTION 777

It was a sister ship to the one he was riding, Lowell knew, except that on this hull the faded black letters fully fifty feet in height read:

U.S.A.
SOUTHEAST SUBTROPICAL
(BAHIA-HONDA)
VALLEY FORGE SECTION 313

Lowell turned to walk down through the *Valley Forge,* his mind still on the public address communication. He reached the giant hold and paused to grasp an upright pipe. Without being aware of it, his hands tightened with his thoughts. So much rode on the announcement: his work, his life, the lives of all people on Earth, really.

Then a voice said:

“ATTENTION . . . ATTENTION . . . CONSERVATION FREIGHTERS ‘VALLEY FORGE’, ‘BERKSHIRE’, ‘SEQUOIA’ . . . STAND BY FOR EXECUTIVE DIRECTIVE ANNOUNCEMENT AT 2100 HOURS . . .”

TWO

With the fading of the announcer's voice, Lowell sighed. There was nothing to do but wait until 2100 hours. He walked back through the cargo hold, then up the steps and back along the corridor to the kitchen.

Inside, he moved again to the window to stare out at the mighty hull of the *Valley Forge.* His hands tightened on the sill. The message would be a summons from home he told himself. It must be. Earth was ready for help from all the eighteen forests of *Valley Forge, Berkshire,* and *Sequoia.*

He continued to stare out over the ship. He could never quite get used to its size. It was even greater than the largest seagoing freighter. It was made up of several distinctly different sections interconnected by an intricate space-frame network.

Six thrilling geodesic domes dominated the forward bulk of the ship, while the core of the vessel was a complex maze of giant tanks, ducts, and catwalks, trailed by another space-frame grid interspersed with faceted octahedron modules.

Lowell let his gaze follow along the catwalks and bridges. The metal surfaces were like mirrors of gold and silver, with piping and ducts and louvers of opalescent white and matte black. "Stark and dazzlingly beautiful in the raw sunlight," Lowell murmured.

He looked along the hull with affection noting that it was worn and patched, faded from years in space—then caught his breath. For there beyond the hull, in staggering perspective, hung Saturn, her rings nearly filling the window frame.

Suddenly in the foreground, a drone appeared, walking soundlessly down a catwalk with an odd rocking gait. He was worn and patched, like the other drones around the hull, bearing a stenciled number—2—and, like the ship, had grown old in service.

Lowell watched with fondness as the drone passed over the huge, faded black lettering on the side of the ship's hull. Suddenly the drone stopped, and its manipulator emerged with a gleaming silver disc. He tilted forward and there was a flash of blue-white incandescence as it welded the disc to a meteoroid fracture in the ship's hull.

"Wow!" Lowell exclaimed watching the drone work. "Some little guy!"

The drone straightened. Its manipulator arm retracted and it passed

by on its unending search for damage. Finally it disappeared slowly over the curvature of the hull.

Lowell looked beyond the *Valley Forge* and saw in the distance a third sister ship riding parallel orbit. The ship seemed identical to *Valley Forge* and *Berkshire* and on its hull lay the same painted American flag and faded black lettering that read:

U.S.A.
NORTHWEST CONIFEROUS
(LOMAX)
SEQUOIA SECTION 244

In the foreground now two more drones appeared, then passed out of Lowell's view, on their way to some programed job.

He looked off into space again, reassuring himself that on the opposite side of *Valley Forge* rode the third ship that Lowell had seen before.

"Three wonderful ships," Lowell breathed, his hands tightening further on the window sill. "Loaded with healthy plants and trees, ready, waiting . . ."

Lowell walked from the kitchen to the corridor, then down to his room. He flung himself on his cot and lay gazing up at the ceiling.

Hours passed and finally he could stand the waiting no longer. Rising, he sought the recreation room, just across from Main Control.

Keenan, Barker, and Wolf were playing poker. Stacks of chips lay before each player. It was late evening, and though they were all keyed up, it was obvious they were all just killing time.

Lowell sank to a chair. "Deal me in," he suggested quietly. Wolf looked at his face, tight with strain. "You too?" he asked, and laughed too loud.

Keenan shuffled the cards, passed them to Barker to cut, then dealt. Each player scanned his hand.

"Two cards," Barker said.

"Two beauties coming up," Keenan said and dealt him two cards.

"I'll play these," Lowell said.

Keenan grinned. "The Cantaloupe Kid is pat," he said. "Him who's got stars in his eyes, looking for the message."

"Cut it out, Keenan," Wolf said, then added, "I'll take three."

Lowell looked at his cards, but he was conscious of the radio close by. The message to return to Earth would come any time now. It must come! It must be what he'd been waiting for—for eight years.

Keenan said, "Deck's still open . . . dealer takes one card . . . your bet, Barker."

“Fifty,” Barker said and threw a chip into the pot.

“Raise a hundred,” Lowell said softly.

“Call,” came Wolf’s voice.

Keenan squeezed off his cards. “I’ll call the Kid.”

“I fold.” Barker threw in his cards.

Lowell spread his hand on the table, face up revealing a straight to the King.

“Beats me,” Wolf grunted.

“Me too,” Keenan added.

Lowell raked in the pot. His hands were not steady. His mind was on the radio message. He looked toward the radio, then back to the table.

“Me too, Cantaloupe Kid.” Barker jumped up. “I wish they’d hurry up with that transmission. I want to go to bed.”

“Go ahead,” Keenan snapped.

“You know I can’t sleep unless Lowell tucks me in,” Barker said.

Keenan and Wolf couldn’t help laughing.

“Drop dead, Barker,” Lowell said softly.

Barker swung around. “If I’d been up here eight years, I might consider it.”

Lowell smiled slightly. “Be that as it may, I suggest you stay awake a little longer. The transmission might rekindle your will to live.”

“You think it will be a recall?” Wolf faced Lowell.

Lowell’s face grew guarded. “Let’s just say I think my communications may finally bear some fruit.”

“Cantaloupes, by any chance?” Barker jibed.

Lowell nodded, his face serious. “They’re probably ready to reestablish the parks and forest system.”

“With you no doubt as director?” Barker put in.

Lowell’s face darkened. This remark struck home. “Who else is more qualified? I’ve given my life to this project.”

“Really,” Keenan said, “it’s more likely they’re going to announce cutbacks.”

“Cutbacks!” Lowell stood up, his face incredulous. “No—no way!”

“Lowell, you’re dreaming,” Barker cut in.

“Some one has to,” Lowell said, hotly. “Some one’s got to care, to make sure that these forests survive. What kind of world will it be if all this incredible life is permanently lost?”

Wolf reasoned, “It’s been too long, Lowell. People don’t care. There are more important things now.”

"Besides," Keenan put in, "it's just not possible to change the half-life on those poisons over night."

Wolf nodded. "You can't filter the whole Earth, Lowell. It's amazing they converted these freighters and saved as many samples as they did."

Barker touched Lowell's quivering shoulder. "Wake up, buddy . . . You're caretaking an empty dream."

Lowell shot back, "Oh, really?"

Wolf tried to stop it. "Let's relax," he soothed. "For all we know, it's probably just a routine checkout."

Keenan nodded toward Lowell. "Well, he's not getting this week's mental health award, Wolfie."

Barker reached for the cards. "C'mon let's play poker . . . Your deal, Star Eyes." Lowell took up the deck and the game went on.

A drone entered, unnoticed by all but Lowell, and began straightening up and collecting empty glasses.

But finally it was too much for them all. They threw down their cards and formed a semicircle before the main console, tense, waiting . . .

A clock/calendar on the wall read:

21:00 Wednesday 14 November

All at once the radio filled the room with whistling, howling static which finally gave way to a very distant-sounding voice . . . Lowell tried to tune it in, but Barker took over.

Then came a radio voice:

" 'VALLEY FORGE,' 'BERKSHIRE,' 'SEQUOIA' . . . 'VALLEY FORGE,' 'BERKSHIRE,' 'SEQUOIA' . . . THIS IS COM CENTRAL . . . CHANNEL OPEN FOR EXECUTIVE ORDER A.U.C. 3423 . . .

There followed a long pause, then more static, then:

" 'VALLEY FORGE,' 'BERKSHIRE,' 'SEQUOIA' . . . 'VALLEY FORGE,' 'BERKSHIRE,' 'SEQUOIA' . . . THIS IS COM CENTRAL . . . CHANNEL OPEN FOR EXECUTIVE ORDER A.U.C. 3423 . . .

There followed a long pause with whistling and static, then:

"IMMEDIATE ALL PERSONNEL SOUTHEAST SUB-TROPICAL (BAHIA-HONDA) 'VALLEY FORGE' SECTION 414 IMPLEMENT ABANDON AND DESTRUCT DIRECTIVE A.U.C. RED . . . COMMENCING 0900 HOURS, ARM AND LOAD EXPLOSIVE SQUIBS ON ALL FOREST UNITS . . . COMMENCING 1000 HOURS 'BERKSHIRE' AND 'SEQUOIA' ESTABLISH SAFE DISTANCING . . . COMMENCING 1100 HOURS AFFECT JETTISON AND AUTO-DESTRUCT OF ALL FOREST UNITS . . . REPEAT, COMMENCING 1100 HOURS AFFECT JETTISON AND AUTO-DESTRUCT OF ALL FOREST UNITS . . ."

THREE

For a moment there was flat silence in Main Control. Lowell stared fixedly at the now dead radio, a look of utter disbelief frozen on his face. Then pandemonium broke loose.

Keenan and Barker jumped to their feet to do a war dance around the room. “Whoopee!” yelled Keenan. “This is it! We’re going home!”

“Yeah!” Barker pounded Keenan on the back. “Aah, I can’t believe it. What’d they say? What’d they say?”

“I told you, I told you: ‘Pack up your domes and go home.’ ”

In the background static of the radio came the indistinct words, “. . . effect jettison and auto-destruct of all forest units. Kiss ’em all good-bye, boys.”

Wolf leaned across the table to put out a consoling hand. “Lowell, I’m sorry,” he said, then added, after a moment’s thought: “Makes sense, though.”

Lowell stared straight ahead of him, still unable to believe what had just come over. Blow up his forests that he’d tended for eight years? Destroy ponderosa pines that could reforest the Sierra dying from smog around San Bernardino? Obliterate his roses and ferns and all of his beautiful shrubs that would someday make Earth unfold and sparkle with new life?

“It’s insane,” Lowell finally managed and rose to his feet. For a second an embarrassed silence fell over the other men.

Lowell moved woodenly out of the room and descended the steps with unseeing eyes. He walked down the stairway and through the main cargo area, then to the tunnel and out into his forest. Through the trees and delicate latticework of the dome his eyes made out Saturn, winking stars, and the distant sun.

Slowly, deliberately, he walked to a switch and flooded the area with a dim suffusing light. “Aah!” He looked around him and walked on to touch a leaf here, a flower there.

A falcon flew from the woods to land lightly on his outstretched arm. He stroked the soft brown feathers, while a bird’s song trilled out its joy from nearby.

For a moment there was silence . . .

Suddenly from the spaceship *Berkshire,* riding orbit with *Valley Forge,* came the sound of a song. It was a song of children playing in

the woods—in the sun:

“Fields of children running wild
In the sun.
Like a forest is your child growing
  wild
In the sun.”

Lowell paused. His face softened with the music from the radio filling the dome. The song went on:

“Doomed in his innocence
In the sun.
Gather your children to your side
In the sun.
Tell them all they love will die
Tell them why
In the sun.
Tell them it’s not too late
Cultivate
One by one.”

Lowell nodded. It was true. It wasn’t too late. The song concluded:

“Tell them to harvest and rejoice
In the sun.”

For a long moment, Lowell’s face softened and he looked around him. His beloved forest was real. It was there and waiting. But then, reality flooded out his joy. With his rising anger came the sound of a waterfall and a soft breeze sifting through the trees. Lowell moved on, his footsteps echoing against the faceted roof.

“All to be destroyed!” he murmured. “All gone when they should reforest the Earth and make it come alive again.” He dropped to a log. A squirrel came from the underbrush to sit up on his haunches and stare quizzically at Lowell. Lowell gently held out his hand. He sat there for a long time.

Suddenly it was morning. Lowell rose stiffly and walked back through the tunnel to the control room, then up to the mess hall. He glanced around him, painfully aware of the conversation.

Wolf sat at a table. Barker thumbed through a manual, while Keenan and Wolf ate breakfast.

“It looks as though there are two ways to go here,” Barker said, looking up. “Once we set the squibs, we can either blow them with the manual detonators or use the remote detonator in the cargo hold.”

Lowell sank silently to a chair, his mind on the domes.

“How far out do they go before they explode?” Wolf queried.

“About six miles.” Barker smiled. “We should feel quite a hefty jolt.”

Lowell rose mechanically and brought a cantaloupe to the table, still aware of Wolf’s beaming and Keenan’s delighted grin.

“I want a front-row seat when these babies go,” Keenan said, his grin widening.

“I’ll bet you do,” Barker said, then turned to Lowell. “Hey, c’mon, Flowerface, cheer up.”

“You’re cheerful enough for all of us,” Lowell managed.

“Orders are orders,” Keenan shrugged. “Can’t disobey a central directive.”

Lowell slowly began to slice his cantaloupe.

Suddenly Keenan faced Barker. “Hey, how about blowing the domes all at once—all six of ’em?”

“Aah, wait a minute.” Barker leafed through the manual, then stopped with “Sorry.” He read aloud, “No more than two forest units may be severed from the spaceship simultaneously. They must be a pair of one odd and one even number in a single tandem cluster.”

Keenan asked, “How far out do they go before they bomb?”

“About six miles,” Barker answered. “Wolf asked that before.”

Keenan turned to Lowell and pointed to his plate.

“Lowell, you have to eat that stuff in here? It stinks.”

“You never let up, do you?”

“Aw, now you’ve hurt his feelings,” Barker jibed.

“I’d like to know what any of you know about real food.” Lowell faced them all.

“Lowell, what do you mean, ‘real food’?” Keenan demanded. “Grows out of the dirt. That’s real food, isn’t it?”

“That’s right,” Lowell agreed heartily. “This happens to be nature’s greatest gift.”

“To a celibate, maybe,” Barker jibed.

Keenan laughed. “Maybe he knows something we don’t know.”

“Lowell, give me a slice of that cantaloupe, hunh?” Barker swung to him. “Thanks, Lowell, a slice.”

“I’d be delighted to give you a slice of cantaloupe,” Keenan mimicked.

Lowell reared to his feet. His face was livid with frustration and rage. "Just sit down and shut up." He glared at Keenan. "Sit d-o-w-n!!! Sit d-o-w-n!!! Shut up! Shut up! Leave me alone all of you and let me eat!"

"Hey, what's the big deal?" Keenan demanded. "I can't see the difference between that and this anyway."

"You don't see the difference! The difference is that I grew it! That's what the difference is! That I picked it and I fixed it. And it has taste, and it has color, and it has a smell. And it calls back a time when there were flowers all over the Earth, and there were valleys." Lowell's face became transfigured. "There were plains of tall green grass that you could lie down in, that you could go to sleep in. There were blue skies and there was fresh air, and there were things growing all over the place, not just in some domed enclosure blasted millions of miles out into space."

In a flash of memory, Lowell was sixteen again and riding across a wide prairie dotted with clear lakes. Cattle and wild antelopes grazed there, and when they raised their heads, they could see for a hundred miles. It was like the ocean, with the west wind making waves of the tall grass.

Buffalo skulls lay in shallow pits and around rocks where the brutes had come to rub their shaggy bodies free of ticks.

Lowell drew in his breath, remembering.

They had stopped to camp for the night by a river. His father dismounted to build a fire, while Lowell unsaddled the horses and hobbled them for the night.

Supper was a thing of beauty, with the clear river slipping by, singing across rocks.

Afterward they lay around their small fire, stretched out on blankets —staring up at the incredibly close stars, listening to the rattle of the hobbled horses as they grazed, and to the coyotes yipping from hill to hill.

They stretched out to sleep, with the fire nothing but coals . . . And they slept, with the wind sighing through the cottonwoods—the wind that suddenly became a wild, twisting thing that lifted the live coals into the air and scattered them over the parched grass. Oh God!! The wind wasn't their fault; it was just a freak twister. It took them hours to beat the flames out with their saddle blankets, but they did it.

The next morning they rode on under blue skies in the sunshine with the earth sparkling around them. It was wonderful, clean and wholesome, and filled with nature's good air above them and lush

grass under their horses' beating feet.

Lowell leaned forward to jab a finger into Keenan's plate. "Look at that stuff!" he exclaimed in disgust. "How can you guys sit there and really say anything to me about this, this glop?"

Embarrassed laughter went round the table.

He lifted some of the food from Keenan's plate. "Look at that. Fried synthetic glop! And you've become so dependent on it that I'll bet you can't even live without it."

"I don't even want to, Lowell," Barker muttered.

Lowell stared incredulously. "Do you realize how pitiful that is, what you just answered? On Earth everywhere you go the temperature is seventy-five degrees. Everything's the same. All the people are exactly the same."

He paused and asked in a hushed voice, "And what kind of life is that?"

"Lowell, if it's so rotten, why do you want to go back?" Barker demanded.

"Because it's not too late to change it."

Keenan with a half laugh leaned forward.

"What do you want, Lowell? There's hardly any more disease. There's no more poverty. Nobody's out of a job."

"That's right," Lowell conceded bitterly. "Every time we have the argument, you say the same thing to me. You give me the same three answers all the time. 'Everybody has a job.' That's always the last one. But you know what there is no more of? My friend, there's no more beauty, and there's no more imagination. There are no frontiers left to conquer."

He paused to see the effect. By now, he might have been talking to two hundred million Americans. "You know why . . . only one reason why: the same attitude you guys are giving me right in this room today. And that is . . . nobody cares. Nobody cares!"

Lowell's voice dropped. "Take any little girl in America. Look at her young face, her laughing blue eyes. Do you know what she's never going to be able to see?" Lowell's voice choked up. "She's never going to be able to see the simple wonder of a leaf in her hand. Because there aren't going to be any trees." His voice hushed. "You think about that." He paused and gave a big sigh. There was a long silence.

Finally, Barker said, "The fact is, Lowell, if people were interested something would have been done a long time ago." He swung in his seat to Keenan and there was only one thing in his mind now: the

bombing of the domes. “Ready?”

“Yeah . . . I’m ready.”

They rose and moved toward the door.

But Lowell threw his body to block them. He put out his hands, reaching to halt them. “Wait! Wait a minute,” he pleaded. “I don’t think you guys understand what this means. Please don’t blow up the domes. They’re not replaceable.” His voice was choked with emotion.

The three men brushed Lowell aside and moved on.

Barker had the squib case, and Wolf had the instructions.

“Which one first?” Keenan asked.

“Outboard cluster, so let’s hit six.” Barker led the way out of the kitchen and down the corridor leading to the deck below.

They reached the cargo deck and walked on through the tunnel toward Dome Six.

Keenan looked at the squibs that Barker carried.

“Kinda small, aren’t they?”

Barker nodded. “I guess, for nuclear squibs.”

They all reached the forest and began searching for something.

Barker held the silver case marked in bright red:

DANGER
CONTAINS AAK (4) ARMED SQUIBS
Read instructions before use.

Together with the other two, Barker thrashed through the bushes, tearing at the foliage.

Lowell stood listening to the retreating footsteps of the three men headed for Dome Six. Through the kitchen window he could see *Valley Forge* drift through the starry night, its hull and girders glistening.

Restlessly, he made his way to Dome One, and walked through the silent forest. But the thought of its beauty being destroyed drove him back to his room.

He threw himself moodily onto his cot and lay there as though in a trance. An air of doom hung over the ship, almost like the throbbing repetitious beat of drums. It might have been a requiem for the domes that were marked for destruction.

Back at Dome Six, the men continued to search for the tubes. Keenan kicked at a clump of gooseberry bushes. Wolf clambered wildly through clump after clump of ferns. Barker leaped over a rock to slip on the wet turf and land on his left arm.

“Ow, my hand!” He raised his right hand dripping with blood.

“Hey, you all right?” Wolf asked.

“You better get Lowell to fix that for you,” Keenan advised.

“Yeah . . . well . . . you and Wolf find the tubes and wait till I get back.”

Barker set off down the ramp to the tunnel, then on toward the kitchen, expecting to find Lowell there.

But Lowell still lay on his cot, and still stared straight ahead.

Barker came to his door and stood holding his injured hand. Blood dripped on the corridor floor.

“Will you help me . . . ?” he managed.

“Oh, yeah . . .” Lowell did not turn his head.

“What’re you doing?” Barker asked.

A moment passed. “Nothing,” Lowell said flatly. Finally he rose to lead the way into surgery, motioning Barker to sit up on the table.

Cleaning the wound in blank-faced silence, Lowell then said, “You did this on a hawthorn, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, if you say so. You know me and bushes.”

Lowell applied a bandage.

All at once an announcement came over the P.A. system:

“ ‘VALLEY FORGE’ . . . ‘VALLEY FORGE’ . . . SAFE DISTANCING MANEUVER IN FIVE MINUTES. ‘VALLEY FORGE’ . . . ‘VALLEY FORGE’ . . . PLEASE STAND BY FOR 1000 HOURS SAFE DISTANCING MANEUVER IN FIVE MINUTES.”

Barker turned to Lowell. “I’m going to need your help for that, Lowell.”

“Oh . . .” Lowell said in a low voice, then added, “Okay . . . okay.” He finished up with Barker’s arm. “There you go . . .”

Barker climbed off the table and led the way to the next room. Entering Main Control, he sat down in the center chair and began to punch controls.

Glancing up, he motioned Lowell into a chair on his right. Lowell sat down. Barker said: “Set GYRO to double four . . . 0 . . . six.

Lowell did not move.

“Set GYRO to double four . . . 0 . . . six.” Barker’s voice said sharply.

A sharp whirring noise penetrated Main Control.

Again came the P.A. and the voice of *Berkshire’s* commander, Neal:

“ ‘VALLEY FORGE.’ . . . THIS IS ‘BERKSHIRE.’ . . . YOU THERE, MARTY?”

“Okay.”

Neal’s voice continued:

“WE’RE COUNTING NOW FOR YOUR DOUBLE FOUR . . . 0 . . . SIX DISTANCING ABOUT TWENTY SECONDS.”

Barker repeated: “Set for distancing.”

Lowell sat on in his right-hand console chair. Things seemed unreal around him. It seemed as if this was a mad dream.

Suddenly Neal's voice began counting:

"OKAY . . . EIGHT, SEVEN, SIX, FIVE, FOUR, THREE, TWO, ONE . . . THAT'S A GO . . ."

Neal's voice ended on the upbeat, with an air of accomplishment, while a low booming explosion reverberated through the deathly stillness.

Barker said, "Our ship will pull away."

Lowell did not reply.

They sat watching console and main status display. Suddenly a series of interconnected display lights glowed brightly and they heard a distant engine sound. It lasted only about three seconds, then cut off and the display lights winked out.

Neal's voice came again:

"THANKS, MARTY . . . WE'RE CLEAR, STAND BY FOR UPDATES."

Barker punched a switch and got up. Ignoring Lowell, he walked out of the room. Within Lowell the slow dirgelike sound pulsed on.

Back in the forest, Wolf had pushed tall grass and ferns back with his boot, exposing a short, eight-inch round, hydrantlike insertion tube protruding from the ground.

Barker came over with the silvery metal case and opened it. Inside, bedded in black packing, lay four gleaming, explosive squibs. Wolf gave a low whistle.

Barker removed one of the squibs, armed it with a twist of the wrist, opened the breech lock on the insertion tube and dropped in the squib.

There followed a long, drawn out sigh of air, then a sharp metallic click as the squib locked in. Wolf grinned as Barker closed the breech lock and twisted the cap to the "arm" position. "Loaded and ready to go," he said airily.

From the distance came another explosion. "Aaah . . . there's another nuke tube!" A series of shots followed.

A startled rabbit ran from the bushes to sit up, with head high, listening. It suddenly bolted.

Birds took flight. A squirrel ran madly up a tree trunk, chattering, scolding. All about, animals took cover.

Wolf, Barker, and Keenan threshed their way through the forest, headed for the cargo hold. Once there, they walked into a little room adjoining the cargo space.

In the background a drone worked at stacking modules.

Barker began reading on the radio: "Reading nine, nine nine . . . 0 . . . nine. Plus four nine . . . 0 . . . four. Plus eight.

Neal corroborated from *Berkshire:*

"NINE, NINE NINE . . . 0 . . . NINE. PLUS FOUR NINE . . . 0 . . . FOUR. PLUS EIGHT."

Barker: "Right."

Neal came back heartily, buoyantly:

"OKAY, LOOKS TO ME LIKE THAT'S A GO . . ."

"Right."

Neal went on:

"WE'RE READY FOR SOME REAL FIREWORKS HERE . . . TWENTY FIVE SECONDS . . ."

"We're looking forward to it too, Neal."

"STEADY HAND, BUDDY, DON'T WANT ANY OF YOU BOYS TO GET HURT."

"Right. Will do." Barker paused a moment, then queried, "Where's Lowell now?" Keenan laughed, derisively. "I think I saw him down near One with some empty flower pots." They all laughed.

Suddenly there was a dull thud, then another, and another. They all paused, listening.

"Oooh. That must be *Berkshire,"* Wolf grinned.

"Yeah," Keenan nodded.

Barker said, "C'mon, let's load up five, ready to blow."

He pulled another silver case from a compartment and they all started off.

More thuds sounded: they were louder.

Again the three paused, drawing up together in the cavernous gloom.

"That's *Sequoia,"* Wolf said. "Blowing her domes."

They all moved toward Dome Five to repeat what they'd done in Dome Six.

At length they all walked back to the cargo hold and the little anteroom with the detonator control panels.

Keenan placed two squib containers on the table and opened them. The squibs were gone and Keenan pulled out the manual detonator from each box.

"Barker, do we need these?" he asked.

"No, let's use the panel for now . . . ah . . . watch those lights there, John."

Wolf looked at the blank panel. "I don't see anything."

Barker punched the switch. "Okay, ready on Six."

Wolf saw a light blink. "Right . . . on Six."

"Set," Barker snapped.

"Set Six," Wolf said.

"Ready on Five," Barker went on.

"On Five," Wolf replied.

"Set?" Barker snapped.

"Set Five," Wolf added.

Barker paused a moment, thinking, irritated.

"You think Lowell is still down in One?"

"Well," Keenan said, "he sure isn't in Five or Six . . . Come on, let's blow 'em."

Barker flipped a switch on Six and the safety cover flipped up.

Keenan continued, "Hit it, Andy."

Andy's finger hit the button.

Immediately, there was a distant crack, shaking the hull.

In Dome One, Lowell was kneeling by a plant, listening to the sound, watching as the earth in front of him shuddered.

An opaque, white vapor wreathed the farthest nodal structure beneath Dome Six. The gap widened slowly and fragments of black insulation drifted and turned in space.

Suddenly, on the severed unit, a cluster of vernier nozzles went off with a flash.

Slowly, trailing a veil of blue-white borealic gas, the dome began to move away.

Lowell sprang to his feet, waiting. His hand clutched the trowel so hard that his knuckles whitened. Suddenly there was a soundless, blinding, white flash. Lowell's face contorted as though in pain.

"Aah—!" burst from his lips. He flinched as the dull thud of the shock wave hit the ship.

Down in Detonator Control, Barker, Keenan, and Wolf hovered over the panel.

"Let's go on Five," Barker ordered.

"Hit Five," Wolf echoed.

The connecting node on Five burst into action. The primacord fires sheared the node. The dome began to drift. As the vapor cleared, there was another soundless, blinding, white flash. The light died and now, on the separated dome, the verniers fired. Slowly, trailing a veil of blue-white gas, the dome began to move away.

In the forest of Dome One Lowell still waited.

There was another detonation.

Lowell's face contorted with anguish. Sweat stood out on his brow.

His eyes filled with tears.

The verniers cut out. There was a pause, then a flash of terrible light that consumed the dome, bleaching out the sky, turning it to orange, to yellow, to a stark, unbearable white.

For an instant where the dome had been he saw a huge expanding bubble of hydrogen vapor. Then there was nothing, not even a fragment—nothing but empty space.

Lowell, looking stricken, stared out across the forest to the incredible sight beyond. Behind him, some distance away, a drone went about trimming a plant, oblivious to any disturbance.

All at once he saw another dome rise in the foreground. It was just outside the latticework of the geodesic structure. The dome rose, and slowly moved up and away. Then abruptly its verniers cut out . . .

Again came that blinding flash as the dome exploded.

Lowell began to tremble.

Almost as though hypnotized he again watched the same process, then another blinding flash.

A squirrel ran on a log, stopped and listened. It trembled, its fur ruffling.

Lowell did not see it. He was looking at the empty sky that had so shortly before held one of his precious forests. Suddenly, rage seized him.

He stood, transfixed, before vacant sky; his eyes narrowed.

Abruptly he threw down his tools, and in deadly silence he waited.

Back in the cargo hold, Wolf pulled out the squib case for Number Two and handed it to Keenan. He took Number One for himself.

"Hey," Wolf said, pleased with himself, "how about you guys loading Two: I'll take One, myself. We'll blow 'em together."

"Fantastic," Barker said. "Let's go, Marty."

Near the tunnel entrance of Dome One, Lowell waited.

Finally from the tunnel came the low whine of a car. The whine increased to a shrill screech as it drew closer.

Lowell's face grew stony and expressionless, as he listened. Suddenly he reached to one side and slowly pulled a shovel from the tool cart.

The car drew up and Wolf got out, carrying his squib case.

FOUR

Wolf tried to brush past Lowell. Lowell blocked him with his shaking body.

“What’re you doing, Lowell?” Wolf demanded, advancing again.

Lowell gave ground. “You’re not comin’ in here.” His voice, barely audible, was charged, intense.

Wolf shoved forward. “Look, Lowell, I know how you feel.”

“You don’t know how I feel.” Lowell pointed to the squib case. “If you knew how I felt, you wouldn’t be in here with that.”

“Listen.” Wolf closed the gap between them. “I’m on a tight schedule and I don’t want to have to fight with you.”

“I don’t care about your schedule. You are not using those things in my forest.”

“Look.” Wolf dived to pass him. “I don’t have time to argue.”

Angered now, Lowell swung back with his shovel and brought it down on Wolf. Wolf parried the blow with his steel case. The shovel clattered to the ground. A drone appeared from the tunnel and stopped, its way blocked by the fight.

Wolf, crouching now, grabbed the shovel and swung it upwards into Lowell’s thigh. Lowell groaned in anguish as the shovel tore into his flesh, immediately bringing blood. He fell back and Wolf, not uttering a word, moved past him, picked up his case and continued on.

The drone watched, registering nothing.

With great effort, Lowell raised himself and moved forward enough to grab Wolf around the neck in a viselike grip. His hands, driven by his fury, locked on Wolf’s throat with deadly purpose.

The two fell to the dirt. Grunts escaped them. Lowell’s grip did not loosen. Wolf gasped and clutched at Lowell, but slowly with their struggle, lost strength.

Lowell was on top of Wolf, his face contorted, his teeth gritted. His hands tightened around the dying man’s neck.

After a long hold, Lowell clambered to his feet, with tears streaming down his face. In disbelief he gaped at the dead Wolf. Panting, fighting for breath, he finally blurted out, “You can’t blow up this forest! My forest!”

For the first time, he spied the drone, just looking in his direction. After a moment, Lowell turned and limped with agonizing effort into

the tunnel.

In forest Number Two, Barker hunched over an insertion tube as Keenan stood holding the empty squib container. Barker closed the breech lock, turned the handle and rose.

"That's set, Marty," Barker said, all smiles. "Set for manual detonation in cargo hull. Let's go."

They started to leave, then Keenan stopped, and reached down to pull out a bunch of flowers.

"For Lowell . . . good old Lowe . . ."

Back in the tunnel, Lowell fought his way to the cargo hull, then over to the detonator panel. It was as though he could see into Dome Two where Barker and Keenan stood with his bouquet.

For a moment, sick with pain, he stared down through the tunnel leading to Number Two Dome, then looked back to the detonator panel.

The green "ready" light flashed on Number Two.

"Ready . . . ?" Lowell questioned. "Am I ready to follow Barker and Keenan into oblivion?"

For a moment his hand paused on the switch. Then the empty skies that had held his four other beloved domes came to him. "Would this be five . . . ? The last chance. The last chance for Earth."

Lowell's face, contorted with anguish, set with purpose.

"Ready!" he answered the green "ready" light. His hand reached forward, flipped up the safety, then pushed the detonator, hard . . . !

Back in Dome Two Keenan's voice died away on the word "Lowe . . ." as the shock hit him.

Suddenly, he and Barker ran crazily for the tunnel exit, but it sealed with dooming finality before they reached it.

At the connecting node, the metal sheared into twisting shards of shrapnel as the node split and pulled apart from its connection to the spaceship.

There followed long fateful moments—moments in which Keenan and Barker beat at the steel tunnel door that trapped them in Dome Two—moments that sent them cursing and running wildly through the woods, then coming back to again beat at the implacably silent barrier. They were doomed along with the forest.

Finally nothing but the ship and the stars remained. Nothing moved.

Where, seconds before there had been Dome Two, now nothing remained but the ship, Dome One, and the stars. Nothing moved.

By an effort of sheer will, Lowell drew himself along the cargo hull. His face was bathed in sweat, his eyes red-rimmed. His tongue constantly explored his dry lips. Reaching the stairway, he dragged his leg forward and up.

Radio voices surrounded him, indistinct at first, then with more clarity. Fleet Communications were congratulating each other.

Lowell's face was a mirror of conflicting emotions. Anguish, disdain, and a wild wonder as to the future succeeded each other in rapid succession. "What shall I do now?" he cried out.

Gasping with pain, he fought on up the stairs to the corridor, then into Main Control. Lowell hopped to a desk and pulled a piece of electrical wiring from a drawer and fashioned a tourniquet.

Suddenly Neal's voice came over the radio:

" 'VALLEY FORGE.' COME IN, 'VALLEY FORGE.' READING FOUR . . . 0 . . . FOUR . . . 0 'BERKSHIRE' TO 'VALLEY FORGE.' COME IN, 'VALLEY FORGE.' "

Lowell swallowed, and stirred, then with a superhuman effort took a step forward, then another. Reaching the console, he stopped. Sweat streamed down his face. Finally he managed to pick up the microphone, hesitated, then opened the line: *"Valley Forge* to *Berkshire.* You still there, Neal?" he asked.

"YES. BARKER?"

Lowell's lips twisted. "No, this is Lowell."

". . . UNH, WHAT'S THE TROUBLE, LOWELL?"

"Seem to be experiencing some kind of problem with the main coupling."

Neal seemed to register thought, then

". . . UNH, MIGHT BE YOUR INTERFACE IS OFF THE AL."

"Well that's what we figured it probably was. We're going ahead and setting it right now."

"WE'LL BE GETTING BACK TO YOU. JUST AS SOON AS WE CAN. AAH, LOWELL . . ."

"Yeah."

Neal's voice grew concerned.

". . . EVERYTHING OKAY OVER THERE . . . ?"

"Oh . . . yeah, okay. Everything's A-okay."

"WE'LL WAIT TO HEAR, BUDDY."

"Roger!" Lowell got up and, holding his thigh in pain, moved to the auxiliary control room. He dropped into a chair and spoke into a microphone: "Drone One, Drone Two, Drone Three, please report immediately to the main cargo area."

Through the screen he saw a drone working on the ship's hull. At the message, it retracted its manipulator and proceeded toward the

hatchway.

Beyond the drone, the huge antenna revolved. Just past it gleamed the forest dome, and farther in the distance, *Sequoia, Northwest Coniferous* still orbited alongside. Drones labored on her hull like tiny ants. Her domes were gone.

With the message to the drones delivered, Lowell struggled back to Main Control. Coming through the door, he heard Neal's voice again . . .

" 'BERKSHIRE' TO 'VALLEY FORGE' . . . ?"

"Yeah, yeah." Lowell said impatiently.

"COME IN 'VALLEY FORGE.' 'BERKSHIRE' TO 'VALLEY FORGE.' COME IN 'VALLEY FORGE,' "

went on insistently.

" 'BERKSHIRE' TO 'VALLEY FORGE.' COME IN 'VALLEY FORGE.' COME IN . . . 'BERKSHIRE' TO 'VALLEY FORGE.' "

"Valley Forge to *Berkshire.* Come in, *Berkshire."* Lowell's voice betrayed his pain.

"HOW'S IT DOING, LOWELL?"

"It's not going too well. I'm afraid we're going to have to torch those pins."

"WELL MOVE ON IT, BUDDY. DARKNESS IS COMING UP ON YOU. THREE . . . THREE TWO ZERO . . . ONE."

"Right, we'll try our best."

"BOYS HERE GETTING ANXIOUS FOR HOME."

"Right, I understand."

"COMING INTO DARKNESS AT THREE . . . THREE TWO ZERO . . . ONE. BLOW IT ANY OLD WAY YOU CAN, LOWELL. BIG BILLY WANTS TO GO."

"We're tryin'." Lowell lifted his thumb from the microphone switch and the line went dead. In the sudden, eerie silence, Lowell stood for a moment, motionless.

For seconds he continued to hover over the console. Suddenly he began punching switches, following the same pattern that Barker had used earlier.

A voice from *Sequoia* came over the speaker, telling of bombings of other domes in space with their cargoes of forests.

"YELLOWSTONE REPORTS FINAL JETTISON. ARCADIA, BLUE RIDGE, GLACIER, MOJAVE REPORT FINAL JETTISON . . . UNH, WE'VE GOT A HOLD ON 'VALLEY FORGE.' "

"RIGHT!" A second voice confirmed.

Lowell let out his breath, and turned to ease himself down in front of Main Control console.

For a moment, staring at the maze of buttons, switches, readouts, and displays, a panic seemed to take him. He grew faint. He almost fell, then steadied himself and took two or three deep breaths. His

hand moved out, wavered. He flicked a switch tentatively. Then he flicked another.

Blood was dripping, drop by drop, onto the rubber flooring.

Below deck, three drones were filing along in a row, headed, as Lowell had ordered, for the main cargo area. Delicate yet substantial, when they moved their complex hydraulic systems emitted subtle, barely audible hissing sounds. Their feet, shod in rubber, made faint squeaks on the metal floor.

Lowell thought of them, and knew that he must see them soon. But now, he turned once more to Main Control and punched coordinates into the main gyro control.

A screen lighted up . . .

SATURN
PLUS 477.9 • PLUS 25/33 • PLUS 99:08

Lowell swallowed, staring at the screen. He turned and watched a clock spinning off half-seconds and approaching a reading of 00:000.

Lowell clicked off, then struggled down to the auxiliary control on the cargo deck.

He hit a switch and the lights dimmed. He punched a button and a low buzzer sounded. A thin, high-pitched beep began. Lowell drew his breath, hit a switch, then a button, and heard a series of loud explosive cracks, like arcing circuit breakers.

Darkness was falling and Saturn was an ominous orange color. *Valley Forge's* exterior running lights dimmed and faded as the ship passed into Saturn's shadow. Off in the distance, the sun was being eclipsed by Saturn. Neal's voice came over the radio:

" 'VALLEY FORGE' . . . 'VALLEY FORGE' . . . WHAT'S WRONG? YOUR LIGHTS ARE GOING?"

Through it all, the drones had reached the cargo area and were beginning to push huge, used, empty cargo modules toward a ramp and out . . .

Suddenly there was an incredible roaring and whooshing of air as the cargo deck equalized with the vacuum of space.

Lowell fought his way back to Main Control. Automatic switches began to slam shut, rapid-fire, their indicator lights shutting off or changing colors. A low hum began, increasing to a shrill whine. A railing began to shudder, then shake violently.

Sweat ran in rivulets down Lowell's strained face. The sound of synthesizers grew louder, shriller, and then static exploded from the radio . . .

Neal's voice came urgently:

" 'VALLEY FORGE' . . . ! 'BERKSHIRE' TO 'VALLEY FORGE.' "

Then *Sequoia* No.2 cut in:

"I HAVE AN EMERGENCY IGNITION ON 'VALLEY FORGE,' READING . . . RED, NINE, NINE 0! I GET A TWO FOUR ON 'VALLEY FORGE,' READING RED . . ."

Lowell gathered himself for a moment, then clicked open the line and spoke into the microphone. He faked a panic, calling stridently: *"Valley Forge* to *Berkshire,* I've got an emergency. Neal, do you read me, Neal? I've got a main buss blowout on three, eight and ten panels . . . I got a premature detonation on Dome Number Two and I've got an explosion on the main cargo deck. Please advise me immediately . . ."

"I READ YOU!"

Neal's voice was panicky.

"PUT ON WOLF, LOWELL. NO, CHANGE THAT, GIMME BARKER."

"I can't find Barker. I can't find Wolf or Keenan either. I'm afraid to death they might have been in Dome Number Two.

"GOD . . . NUMBER TWO BLEW UP! STAND BY!"

Lowell cut off, whispering, "I will."

FIVE

For a moment he stood quietly by the dead radio, then made his way to the vestibule of his room. Like someone not quite rational or who has had a bad dream, Lowell stood motionless in front of his mirror, staring into sunken, haunted eyes.

He drew in his breath, trembling, then opened the tap on his sink and began to wash his face.

Finishing and looking for a towel, he saw a black bag on the adjoining sink. It contained his surgical instruments.

Lowell glanced down at them, then at his leg. Carefully, he loosened the tourniquet. Blood gushed out, pouring down his leg and spreading in a glistening pool around his foot.

Lowell hurriedly closed the tourniquet, then staggered as a wave of nausea swept over him. He reached for the towel rack, but his legs gave out and he fell.

How long he lay there, he never knew. From his position on the floor, he finally opened his eyes. A drone bent over him. Lowell grabbed the little robot's manipulator arm and pulled himself up. Two more drones entered the room. Lowell turned and limped out. The drones idled their mechanisms for a moment, then followed.

Passing Main Control, Lowell paused, then on impulse, walked through the door to sit at the panel. He clicked on the radio, then forcing anger into his voice called out: "*Valley Forge* to *Berkshire. Valley Forge* to *Berkshire.* Come in, Neal . . .

Neal's voice came over:

" 'BERKSHIRE' TO 'VALLEY FORGE.' THIS IS NEAL."

"Yeah," Lowell burst out. "What the hell's taking so long? How am I going to fix this craft? Where am I headed?"

"COMING UP NOW," Neal answered.

But then another voice, more official-sounding, came on:

"LOWELL, THIS IS ANDERSON."

His voice had a solemn but patronizing tone.

"LOWELL, IF YOU CONTINUE AS YOU ARE, YOU'LL HIT THE NORTHEASTERN QUADRANT OF SATURN'S OUTER RING AT THREE . . . 0 . . . TWO TOMORROW."

Smiling faintly but sounding angry, Lowell demanded, "So what does that mean?" To himself, he added, "As if I didn't know. It means finis. Kaput. The end!"

"WE . . . WE DON'T THINK YOU'LL MAKE IT THROUGH, LOWELL," Anderson said

gently. **“YOU GOT ANY FAMILY . . . ?”**

“No . . .”

“WELL . . .” Anderson went on, **“IT’S A BAD ANGLE AND THESE SHIPS AREN’T MADE TO SHOOT THE RAPIDS. THE PLAN IS TO FIND WHERE THE EXPLOSION CHOPPED THE MAIN BUSS AND REROUTE IT. YOU’LL HAVE TO DO SOME CUTTING.”**

Lowell waited a moment then said, “Okay.”

“WE TRACKED A BUNCH OF CARGO MODULES OFF YOUR STARBOARD SIDE,” Anderson went on. **“WE FIGURE MAYBE ONE OF THE GYRO TANKS UNDER THE FLOOR CUT LOOSE. IT MAY HAVE EXPOSED THE MAIN BUSS DUCT, IF WE’RE LUCKY.”**

Lowell was getting faint. “I’ll check it out,” he managed, then turned to drag himself down a corridor to its end and to a door marked in bold black lettering:

EMERGENCY
OPERATING ROOM
CAUTION
WATCH YOUR STEP

Lowell stood for a dazed moment, numbly staring at this information, then pushed inside.

The room was a cold, ceramic white. The walls, ceiling, and floor, where rectilinear scuppers converged at a single chromium drain, glistened.

Directly in front of Lowell stood his own operating table. Above it rested a huge light.

Lowell took a few steps forward, staring at the slab. He fingered the equipment familiarly, then began to prepare dressings and instruments. He was weak and trembling, but managed to assemble the necessary supplies to suture his severed artery.

At length he pulled himself up onto the operating table and lay back against the contoured backrest. His breath came in shudders through stretched lips.

He managed to pull the instruments and dressings nearer and began to cleanse the wound, but fatigue was overwhelming him and he couldn’t even hold his head forward long enough to see what he was doing.

Lowell rested a moment, then slowly raised himself off the operating table. He stood, wavering, then headed for the door.

Seconds later he hobbled down the corridor holding his injured leg before him. He made it into Drone Control, then reaching the console, pulled a manual from a drawer. Leafing through it he stopped at a heading which read:

MAINTENANCE DRONES
OPERATION

Lowell pulled out a circuit card and inserted it under the microscope. He looked into the scope to inspect the microscopic view of an integrated circuit. He watched a microprobe enter from the side and deftly cut a tiny, threadlike wire, then scratch away a small, blue-gray resistance disc. Wires were deftly severed and rerouted.

He saw complex block diagrams, 3-D spatial flow charts, and circuits displayed in digital form.

Lowell's hand moved across the screen and broad strokes of the light pen scattered lines into abstract patterns of pulsing luminosity—then bold, decisive forms appeared from the tip of Lowell's swiftly moving pen.

Lowell looked up to see, in a drone control panel, one of the little robots about to perform its familiar task of welding over a micro-meteoroid impact dent, when suddenly it retracted its manipulator arm and stood erect and motionless.

Through the microscope, Lowell watched a logic terminal block—tiny tweezers lifted a pin from its socket and replaced it in another.

The drone still had not moved.

Two other drones, beyond the first one, stood at attention, silhouetted by stars shining behind them.

Lowell replaced the last cover over the circuits he had altered.

He rose, rubbing the small of his back in discomfort. He pushed three buttons on the display console and after a few seconds three screens brightened with images of each drone's point of view. Lowell ripped off three pieces of white tape and placed one over the corner of each screen. He wrote the numbers one, two, and three on each tape. A long pause, then Lowell called: "Drone One, Drone Two, Drone Three. Report to surgery immediately."

When Lowell reached surgery, the three drones stood motionless inside.

"Drones One . . . Two . . . Three," he said, "I need your help."

The three drones cycled to life, throbbing and whirring.

Lowell picked up a plastic bottle and began washing each drone's manipulator arm in alcohol. This done, he adjusted the operating light over the lowered table, then managed to ease himself down to it.

The drones hovered over Lowell and he addressed the drones. They whirred and clicked silently as he talked: "The procedure's a simple one. You'll remove the tourniquet, suture the artery, clean the wound, then close it and bandage it. Drone One, you will do the procedure, Drone Two, you will assist. Is that clear? Drone Three you will

administer the oxygen anesthetic."

The drones' whirring and clicking changed rhythm, increasing in speed and intensity.

"All right," Lowell said, grasping the oxygen mask. "I'll take a mild anesthesia." In moments, he nodded okay.

The drones began working over Lowell with precision and remarkable intensity. In addition, they coordinated their activities amazingly well, seeming to work in tandem, but with no visible communication between them. But when Drone One required an instrument, it was within easy reach of his motorized arm—held there by Drone Two.

At first Lowell reflected anxiety. This quickly changed to surprize and delight. Under mild anesthesia he began to relax, though still keeping an eye on the procedure.

"Good," he applauded. "Nice work . . . just a little lower there, Drone One . . . That's it . . . excellent."

The drones worked on, unperturbed.

Drone Two began to prepare the dressing for the wound, as Drone One closed the wound with a liquid.

"Good . . . very nice . . ." Lowell commended.

Drone One finished, backed away, and Drone Two applied the bandage. Then Two backed away as well, and both drones' motors seemed to return to idle.

"Neat and tidy," Lowell said surveying the work. Very pleased, he raised himself from the table and tested his leg. It held. "Wonderful . . . superior work . . . You can return to your regular duties now."

The drones clicked and whirred, then turned to leave.

Lowell limped slowly from the Drone Control room and headed for Main Control.

Before going inside he paused a moment.

Valley Forge was alone now, and still in darkness. Saturn was closer, much closer, and huge. Like some cosmic talisman of terrible, preternatural power, it stood against the sky, mute and silent, gripped in its swirling, misty-silver rings.

Lowell could make out the drones working on the hull as usual.

He walked through the door and into Main Control. He sat in a chair, weak, and a little groggy. His breathing was thin, and his motions slow. He began to transmit: "Commander Anderson . . . I can't get anywhere near the main buss duct. It's just all torn up down there."

". . . AAH . . ." Anderson's voice was patronizing, and there was a long

pause. Then he said, **"LISTEN, FREEMAN . . . THAT'S YOUR FIRST NAME, RIGHT?"**

"Right," Lowell replied.

"HAVE YOU GOT ANY FAMILY, FREEMAN?"

"No, sir," Lowell said.

"WELL . . . LISTEN, FREEMAN . . . YOU'VE BEEN WITH THIS PROJECT SINCE THE START . . . AND YOU'VE KNOWN THE RISKS."

"Yes, sir," Lowell's voice was weak.

"I DON'T REALLY KNOW HOW TO SAY THIS, FREEMAN . . ." Anderson talked as though talking to a common sailor.

"That's all right, sir."

"WE'VE GOT SOME TROUBLE," Anderson went on.

"I figured."

"YES, UH . . . I'M REALLY SORRY."

"For what, sir?"

"WE'LL NEVER BE ABLE TO STOP YOU BEFORE YOU HIT SATURN'S RINGS . . ." Anderson's silence mixed with the radio static.

Lowell's smile came twisted. "I see," he finally managed. "And no one's ever survived it before . . ."

"YOU . . . YOU MIGHT WANT TO CONSIDER TAKING A . . . A PILL?"

Anderson's voice was heavy with meaning.

"Suicide . . . ?" Lowell queried, then shook his head. "No sir . . . I just couldn't."

Anderson went on: **"THEN THE BEST THING WE CAN DO IS SEND OUT A SEARCH PARTY THE LONG WAY AROUND . . . BUT IT'S KIND OF LIKE A NEEDLE IN A HAYSTACK, IF YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN."** He paused a moment then said, **"FREEMAN . . . ?"**

A moment passed. "Yes . . . ?" Lowell asked.

Anderson's voice came with static, then cleared, and became husky with remorse.

"GOD BLESS YOU, FREEMAN," he blurted out. **"YOU'RE A HELL OF AN AMERICAN!"**

Lowell passed a hand across his eyes and looked toward Dome One, with its forest and gardens still riding there intact . . . ready for Earth, when summoned. "Thank you, sir," he managed. "Thank you. I think I am . . ."

Lowell flicked off the radio and there on the screen lay the night sky, and Saturn hanging right there beyond the hull.

Anderson's words "You'll never make it through Saturn's rings," came back to haunt him. He'd said, "Take a pill . . ." Lowell's hands lay idly at his sides. His long face was solemn, his eyes deep in thought.

All at once, the memory of Wolf's inert body lying in the grass came

sharply into Lowell's mental focus.

Almost dreamlike was the gesture of his hand—as though to rub it from his mind.

"It would be a way . . . out," he managed.

He sat on . . . But the beauty of the forest still clung to Lowell's mind and along with it, the precious, dedicated words hanging over his bed that read:

CONSERVATIONISTS' PLEDGE

I GIVE MY PLEDGE AS AN AMERICAN TO SAVE AND FAITHFULLY DEFEND FROM WASTE THE NATURAL RESOURCES OF MY COUNTRY—ITS SOIL, ITS FORESTS, WATERS, AND WILDLIFE.

SIX

Suddenly, with a long look at Saturn's rings that loomed so close, Lowell rose from his chair.

"We'll see," he said, his voice echoing in the deathly silence. "We'll see about navigating those babies."

He hobbled to the corridor, went to his room and began strapping down his botanical equipment. At length he made it into the kitchen where he strapped down the utensils. At last he reached the hold of *Valley Forge* to check the tie-downs of the cargo nodules. Saturn's colored rings seemed to lie right there beyond the hull.

"My forest, Dome One," Lowell murmured and swung toward the tunnel that led to it. Once there, he began stringing guide wires to the trees.

Time seemed to race by.

Now, with the closer approach of *Valley Forge* to Saturn, Lowell could discern discrete particles of Saturn's rings beginning to slam into the more distant parts of the structure.

He became aware of the three drones waddling hastily toward the hatchway, making clicking sounds as they went.

From the control room red warning lights began to flash. Alarms buzzed and shrieked. Lowell turned to grapple his way toward the control room.

The heaving ship flung him against the tunnel wall. He staggered and fell, clutching his thigh in pain, then pulled himself up and through the doorway to Main Control.

He passed the Drone Control console and realized that the drones were outside. He gaped at the screen.

The drones fought to get to the hatchway. But Number Three lagged behind. Lowell yelled into the mike, "Number Three, keep moving!"

Following a close-up of the drones on the screen Lowell saw that drones One and Two were already descending into the hatchway. But the image of Number Three began to flutter and run as the drone got buffeted.

"Keep moving!" Lowell screamed. "Follow One and Two!"

Lowell saw Drone Three cling desperately to the ship. Iridescent plasma and frozen gas of the rings ripped at the Drone, scraping it, pushing in and tearing at his metal body. Finally the drone could hold

on no longer. Lowell watched it slip away into the rainbow of color, and Three's screen went blank.

Lowell, faint and in anguish, tried to hang on to the console.

"Three . . . Thr . . ." he cried out in frustrated anger. "Why didn't you keep moving?"

He looked through a window and saw an antenna shear off and tumble away.

Lowell struggled to the main console and watched the displays in terror. He began to throw switches and punch buttons, trying to fire the engines. But lights began to wink out on the giant display board, and the giant engines began to idle down.

Lowell kept on trying to get the engines to fire, but it was futile. He could just watch the screen and hang on against the surging of the ship. Finally, the only sounds left were the howling of the plasma rings and the creaking of the ship.

Suddenly the shaking stopped and the howling tailed off, leaving the ship in total silence. Lowell slowly sat back in a chair and breathed a long sigh of relief.

Looking at the screen's picture of the ship's bow he saw a sea of stars. Off at an angle he made out Saturn, suddenly smaller now, and receding in the distance.

All at once a giant lassitude crept over Lowell.

He struggled to his feet, out of the control room, and to his bedroom where he flung himself on his cot.

SEVEN

Hours later, Lowell opened his eyes. How long he had slept he didn't know. His room was a mess—books were strewn about the floor, and some of his lab equipment was shattered and broken. He awakened slowly, trying to remember all that had happened. He saw the two drones, inert in a corner.

"Drones One and Two," he said, yawning. The drones turned to face him, idling quietly. "Straighten up in here, will you, please?" Lowell waved a hand around the room.

The drones began to tidy up. Lowell rose and began washing at the sink. Suddenly he stood, staring at himself in the mirror. For a moment, in stricken silence, he thought of Wolf.

He turned to the drones, saying, "Drone One . . . Drone Two . . ." They turned to face him, waiting. "Go to . . . Dome One," Lowell ordered.

The drones turned to leave, while Lowell made his way out of the bedroom and down a corridor to Drone Control. Taking a seat before the Drone Control panel, he watched the drones approach the dome.

They finally entered it through the tunnel.

"Turn right," Lowell ordered, leaning close to the microphone.

The TV images of the drones panned to the right, and suddenly, shockingly, Wolf's body came into view.

Lowell stared transfixed for a moment, then passing a hand across his eyes, said, "Drone One . . . Drone Two . . . take the dead man deeper into the forest. Dig a hole six feet deep, seven feet long, and three feet wide."

He turned from the screen, waiting . . . At length, he turned back to watch the two drones dig a grave with their odd-looking pneumatic claws. At last the hole was ready, and Wolf's body lay nearby, contorted, dead.

Lowell sat motionless, held almost entranced by the strange TV image. Everything seemed so unreal, grotesque, as though it were all a horrible dream.

At last he roused from his lethargy. "Now put him . . . in the grave," he ordered.

He sat watching the drones maneuver Wolf's body into the grave. Wolf's hat fell off, strangely unnoticed. Lowell stared at the drones

placing Wolf in the ground.

"And now, remain there," Lowell went on, softly. "Because I would like to say something . . . before you cover him over."

Questions pounded at him. "How could I have killed Wolf—a good kid? How could I?" He stared on into the screen.

The answer lay right there, just beyond the grave: his forest. Not his, really. Lowell shook his head: America's forest that he, and he alone, had saved. But at what a price. Lowell gave a deep sigh.

"Aah," he managed, "I . . . would like to be able to say a . . . prayer," he stumbled out. "But I . . . don't really know . . . how to say it. Wolf and Barker and Keenan, they weren't exactly my friends." His voice trembled. "But, I did like them. And . . . I don't think," he went on, his voice breaking, "that I'll ever be able to excuse what it is that I did. But I had to do it. And . . ." Lowell fought for control, "I guess that's all that I have to say."

Lowell was silent for a moment, then added in a choking voice, "You can cover him over . . . now."

He sat at the console, and again there came that dirgelike drumbeat through his consciousness.

At length he rose to begin cleaning up the control room. After a few minutes he came out of Main Control, carrying some papers and trash. He noticed Barker's nameplate on a door and ripped it off, then methodically ripped the plates from Keenan's and Wolf's doors as well.

"Okay," he said, and gathered them up with the rest of his trash to head for a refuse module.

From there he walked back to the main console and sat down to begin checking dials. Finally satisfied, he swiveled around to see the two drones silently looking on.

"I am Captain now," he declared. Lowell studied them thoughtfully, for they had registered nothing. They had just stood there, idling quietly.

"Drone One," Lowell went on, "you will answer to the name of Huey . . . Drone Two, you will answer to the name of Dewey."

Lowell smiled at them gently and understanding while an expression of sadness crossed his face. "Louie," he went on, "God bless him, is no longer with us."

The two drones uttered little bleeps from their shutters.

Lowell continued, "Huey, step forward." The drone obeyed. "Good. Dewey, step forward, also . . ." Dewey obeyed.

"Excellent," Lowell applauded. "Now, I've reprogramed you both so that you'll answer directly to me. I don't think you'll have any difficulty making the necessary adjustments. You'll maintain the ship

as usual, but you'll also spend more time with me in the forest . . . We've had a rough journey, and I suspect we'll have our work cut out for us."

The drones continued to stand before Lowell, their engines idling, then waddled back to Drone Control room.

Lowell swung around to the console getting instrument readouts on the various functions of the ship's engines. Indicator lamps for power pods one and four indicated a malfunction in the system. Lowell snapped on the drones' intercom and addressed the drones: "Huey . . . Dewey . . . proceed to power pods one and four. Repeat: proceed to power pods one and four."

Lowell checked the drones as they waddled into the cargo hold. Through the monitor screen he watched them methodically run a maintenance check, whirring and clicking intensely. Lowell jotted it all down in painstaking detail.

At length they completed their task. Their manipulator arms retracted and they stood still.

Lowell continued to monitor the data. But suddenly the flow of information stopped. The lights went out and Lowell leaned back in his chair. A fleeting smile of affection crossed his face and he shook his head wonderingly.

He said into the microphone, "Drone One . . . Drone Two . . . proceed with repairs on the ship."

But the drones did not move; it seemed they were waiting.

More readouts flashed on the console, and Lowell bent to them. All at once, they stopped.

Lowell said into the mike, "Thank you, men," then went on: "Since we're so severely crippled, for all practical purposes, we're stranded out here in space. So we may as well make our adjustments accordingly . . . Huey, Dewey . . . I'm going to sleep for awhile. I want you to go to the forest and begin any necessary repair work there."

Lowell watched the drones move along the hull of the ship, heading for the dome, then turned toward his quarters.

Once inside his room, he walked to a bookshelf and picked out Loren Eiseley's "The Immense Journey" and flopped on his bed.

The silence was absolute except for the slight sigh of the air vents. In the quiet, Lowell pondered: What would be the outcome of his own journey? Where and when would it end?

He opened the book and began to read: "It is when all these voices cease and the waters are still, when along the frozen rivers nothing cries, screams, or howls, that the enormous mindlessness of space settles down upon the soul . . ."

Lowell put down the book with a slight shiver. “When along frozen rivers nothing cries,” he murmured, adding, “When on earth no trees wave their branches, no flowers bloom, what then . . . ?”

Lowell did not know. He only felt that Dome One must be saved. Restlessly, he moved out of the door, drawn by his beloved forest.

Once there, he threw off his clothes and plunged into the deep mind-healing water. Sounds of the forest surrounded him—the birds’ singing, the wind’s sighing through the trees. A good feeling pervaded Lowell, like a new day dawning. He dived deep, came up, then dived again.

Nearby, Huey and Dewey performed their maintenance tasks while the *Valley Forge,* like a wounded animal, plunged on and on.

Lowell soaped himself and rinsed by ducking under the waterfall, then rose to wrap himself in a towel. He stepped from the pond to walk toward the drones, smiling broadly.

“Hello, Huey . . . Hello, Dewey,” he said. “Why don’t you check the hull of the ship and see how we’re doing?”

The drones stopped their work, retracted their manipulator arms, and entered the tunnel.

Lowell began to work in the garden. He bent to examine a flowering plant and then spaded up around it. He fed some of the small animals. At length he moved down to his laboratory to work with his seeds and chemicals, and microscope. He hummed happily.

When he finished his work in the dome, Lowell returned to the ship where he cleaned up the surgery, putting things away, scrubbing and polishing. He went on to rearrange his furniture, then dust and restack his books.

Finally, he went to bed but not to sleep.

Sitting up in bed he reached for his sewing kit and began sewing a Saturn patch on his royal-blue uniform. Soft music, the sound of a Debussy prelude, came to an end. Lowell paused, listening, then went on sewing.

He heard the squeaking of a drone’s feet as it walked past his door.

It moved on, followed by the other drone.

Lowell imagined them in their darkly lit room methodically checking each other over, making adjustments, whirring and clicking . . . a bit like two chimps cleaning each other.

At last Lowell turned on his side and slept.

The giant ship swept on . . . and on . . .

EIGHT

The next morning found Lowell limping among the giant cargo modules, taking inventory on a slate. He had to keep busy, to keep himself from getting bored, from thinking about the past or the future, to keep himself in the present.

Suddenly he had an idea. “Sure,” he said. “That’s it.” He turned and made his way as fast as he could to Main Control.

“Huey, Dewey, please report to Dome One at once,” he ordered.

Pleased with himself, he went down to the cargo hold and got a car, then loaded it up with mulch, some tools, and a tree from one of the nursery modules.

In five minutes, anticipating the work ahead, he drove through the tunnel and out into Dome One.

The two little drones stood on the latticed walk, waiting.

“Oh, so you’re already here. Well—” Lowell climbed from and unloaded the car, then led the way to a small grass plot beside the pool. “Okay, boys,” he said, heartily. “Today, the three of us are going to plant a tree.”

The drones made little bleeping noises and followed Lowell to the site.

Birds sang from the trees, squirrels ran across the grass, and from a tall spruce a crow scolded raucously.

“Now, boys.” Lowell put the little pine on the grass. “We’ll place it right here. Huey, you’ll plant the tree. Dewey, you’ll dig the hole.”

Lowell stood back.

Dewey came forward and with his manipulator arm began to dig the hole.

Lowell felt wonderful. He stared at Dewey, checking him, then up through the bronze-latticed dome that enclosed the forest.

At length, Dewey stepped back. Huey spilled some mulch in the hole, at Lowell’s direction.

“Aah!” Lowell exclaimed. “Splendid, Dewey. Huey!” He stopped to pick up the pine from the grass. “Now, Huey, you plant the tree.” He placed the tree in Huey’s manipulator arm and stepped back.

Huey moved a step forward and extended his arm. The tree tumbled to the ground and lay on its side.

Lowell swung to him in distress. “This is pitiful,” he exclaimed. “The

exact opposite of what it's supposed to be."

Lowell stood for a moment, then turned to the drones. "Why don't you just go ahead with your regular maintenance," he said. "Just do the work that you know." The drones moved away on padded squeaky feet.

Lowell planted the little pine, then walked back to the service car. There lay two sacks of mulch. Lowell carried the bags over to the grass and began flinging the mulch into a bed of ferns and among some rose bushes.

With this done, he walked back to the car and, climbing behind the wheel, headed into the tunnel.

Suddenly on impulse, Lowell accelerated the car wildly and zipped into the cargo hold and round the giant room as Keenan and Barker had done.

He yelled and swayed the little car, driving crazily around the hold. At length, slightly ashamed of himself, Lowell parked the car and walked back to his room.

Flinging himself on his cot, he lay staring up at the ceiling. Time passed.

The giant *Valley Forge* plunged on with its one bronze-latticed dome riding high on the prow.

Lowell picked up a book, a novel, and started to read. The words swam before his eyes. He flung the book down and made his way back to the forest.

There, he paused before a good-sized telescope on a pedestal and pulled off its plastic cover. Glancing up at the dome-turns he spotted a dot in the sky.

He turned the telescope and adjusted its angle with the knobs, then leaned over to look through the eyepiece.

Millions of stars were streaking through his field of view. He moved the telescope around and finally brought it to focus upon a small, bluish dot.

Lowell pushed a control to center Earth in the alignment reticule; he doubled, then quadrupled the magnification. Some details could be made out on the Earth's surface as Lowell stood rubbing his eyes.

After a time, Lowell tired of this. Picking an apricot from a tree, he began eating it while strolling from the forest. Time still crawled.

At length, he went back to the ship where he entered Main Control and sat down at the console, still munching his fruit. He looked at the console for a long moment, then turned on the radio to listen. He heard nothing but distant static. Leaving the radio on, he drifted out of Main Control to the recreation room.

He began to play billiards on the versatron, missing some very easy shots. He continued to play, setting up more difficult combination shots on the elliptical table. He was killing time.

At length he moved to the kitchen to wash some fresh lettuce and prepare a huge salad for himself. From out of the window myriads of stars met his gaze.

Nearby the two drones worked as usual, with Huey taking the lead. But to Lowell everything seemed lifeless and dull. Even the stars held no magic, and the hull of the ship seemed to Lowell to have aged greatly in its journey through the rings.

He sat at the table with his salad. But he only picked at it.

Getting up, he walked to his room where he lay down on his bed and closed his eyes.

It was morning of another day. Lowell rose to shower and dress, then shave. Through it all he stared in somber reflection into his mirror.

Breakfast was just something to swallow. Then Lowell moved back to his forest. He pruned some bushes, working slowly, then more slowly, finally stopping.

Throwing down his shears, he left the forest to walk down corridors and catwalks and into the cargo area. He stopped to polish a brass plate, then rearrange a cargo module that was sticking out. He was running out of things to do on a disabled spaceship that was headed who knew where.

Back in Main Control, he listened vaguely to the radio. But only static came through. Leaving it on, he wandered around the control room, looking for anything of interest.

Lowell drifted to his room to sit on his bed. Propped up with pillows he scanned a large picture book from Earth. He frowned and put the book down, then took it up once more to thumb through it.

Suddenly, a color photograph of a forest devastated by fire held him. This was too much for Lowell, this reminder of Earth's sad plight. He closed the book and returned it to the shelf.

Again he moved to Main Control and, leaning over a solar map, plotted his course. He could see that the map had already been plotted to the vicinity of Saturn, but Lowell marked in a sweeping curve that showed how he was deflected by Saturn into a direction away from the sun instead of around it.

On the screen, he could make out the distant sun and Saturn which was very small now.

"Whew!" He exclaimed. "That *was* a close call."

For a time, he continued to study the screen, then donned his blue spacesuit and wandered over the hull of the ship as he had explored the hold earlier.

He rounded a catwalk and noted the two drones on a distant part of the hull, working together, moving and gesticulating with their manipulators. They were working in the area in which Louie was lost.

It would be a good time to caution them of Louie's fate and warn them to be on the alert.

Approaching them, he picked up a piece of Louie's left foot that had been torn off when he'd been swept overboard.

"You see," he said, holding it up, "this is what happened when Louie grew careless. Now you both be careful."

They paused, bleeped, and made other funny noises, making Lowell wish that he'd been more gentle with them.

Lowell fled to Main Control, but still the radio crackled only with static. The recreation room offered nothing better. Lowell tried solitaire, first straight, then cheating, but it all added up to the same thing: boredom.

He had an inescapable feeling of slipping headlong through space toward an unknown destination.

Suddenly an idea struck Lowell.

Back in Drone Control, he leaned over the console and called into the microphone: "Huey, I want you two guys to report right away to the recreation room."

Lowell walked to a bookcase and brought back a little red book titled: "Official Rules of Card Games."

He pored over it for a time, then began punching instructions into the drone program keyboard. After a time Lowell quit punching instructions and reached to grasp a small cassette which appeared in a dispenser slot. He lifted it out of the frame. Another appeared and he took it out also.

"Aah!" Lowell smiled and headed for the recreation room.

Lowell walked through the door. Huey and Dewey were waiting, idling quietly.

"Well," Lowell stopped short. "You're already here." He paused a moment, then went on, "I'll bet you wonder why I've gathered us together. Haven't you, hunh?"

The drones did not bleep.

"Well, I want to beg your indulgence."

Again Lowell paused, wondering if he'd used the right words. Suddenly he decided not to talk, but reached into his pocket for the

two cassettes. After examining them briefly, he placed them into the receptacles on top of each of the two drones, then stepped back.

A whirring came from them. Lowell smiled and waited, curiously.

All at once Huey's and Dewey's lights were running fully synchronized. Suddenly their motors stopped and they stood staring at Lowell.

"Now!" Lowell said. "You've got your new programs." He paused a moment, waiting for any negative response. The drones did not move.

"Now—" Lowell motioned. "Huey, come over and sit down here."

Huey waddled to sit at the little round table.

"Dewey, come right up here and sit down—come a little closer if you want to, Dewey."

Dewey sidled to the table and sat down.

Lowell felt in charge. He deftly shuffled cards.

"Here's for you, Huey, and you, Dewey, and *me,"* he said, then leaned back with a smug smile. "Now—I'm about to take you two guys for every dime you've got."

Again he paused and looked across the table.

"Now boys—let's play cards."

There followed a long pause.

"Now—Dewey," Lowell prompted. "How many cards do you want, Dewey?"

Dewey put his manipulator forward and three kings tumbled to the table.

Lowell stared at them in outrage, then at Dewey.

"What're you doing? You just threw down three kings!"

He swallowed and burst out, "You're nuts—do you know that?"

Dewey did not let on, did not even bleep. "Well, your hand is obviously dead. Huey, let's see what you've got here."

Lowell looked at Huey's hand.

"Well, he's got trash," he went on. "So—obviously, I'm the winner with three sevens."

Lowell reached to gather in the pot.

"I'm sorry! Thank you, boys. You've got to be quicker than that. You've got to get up early in the morning to beat old Freeman. Let me tell you—" He flashed a cocky smile at them. "Very early in the morning."

He gathered up the cards.

"Now, we'll play another hand and I don't want any mistakes." He stared hard at the drones. "It's up to you, you know. We're not playing

for any old three-in-one oil here, you know."

He dealt the cards, then leaned back.

"Okay—now Dewey, you take two."

The drones bleeped to one another.

"Hey, just a minute," Lowell protested. "What'd I say about talking between you guys? Come on, that's not fair."

The drones bleeped again.

"I'm here all by myself," Lowell went on. "And you guys talking between yourselves. Now stop it. That's a house rule—no more talking!"

He demanded, "How many cards do you want? Huey, you just saw what the man did that last hand and you don't want any cards?"

Huey took no cards, and remained quiet.

"You don't want any cards? Dealer takes two." Lowell faced the little drone. "All right, Huey—what have you got?"

Huey put down a full house.

In the dead silence of the careening *Valley Forge,* Lowell stared at Huey's hand. Suddenly a terrible loneliness engulfed him. He saw the body of Wolf being rolled into his grave. He felt the coldness of the button that he'd pressed, sending Barker and Keenan to their doom.

Suddenly, wild laughter burbled from Lowell's lips. It was the maniacal laughter of a man in deep trouble with himself.

"How about that?" he shouted, and choked, and laughed again. "That man has a full house and he knew it." Lowell rocked in his seat and stared up. "Huey didn't need any cards—he had a full house and he knew it—!"

Lowell's laughter went on and on. It was uncontrolled and hysterical amidst his loneliness with only the companionship of the unfeeling drones. His eyes watered and his lips trembled and his laughter filled the recreation room and spilled out over the bronzed hull of *Valley Forge,* drifting through space under a sea of stars.

At last Lowell fled from the recreation room to the corridor and then to his room. He flopped on his cot . . .

Above his bed, on a shelf, a calendar clock read:

04:02 Tuesday 8 April

NINE

When Lowell awakened the next morning, he was restless and grumpy. He had slept in his suit and it was wrinkled and soiled. The memory of the card game lingered like a nauseous fog in his mind, and the loneliness seemed intensified.

The drones whirred to life, and stood waiting.

Lowell, unshaven and without his shower, groped into the corridor with the drones' feet making funny squeaky noises along the floor.

Following the corridor, Lowell made it to Main Control, with Huey and Dewey close behind.

For a moment, Lowell stared at the radio switch then seated himself before it. Hesitating an instant, he finally flicked it on.

Static instantly filled the room, and then wave on wave of empty roaring. But, as Lowell worked the tuner, he heard something else.

He turned the volume up higher, then higher still. He was sweating now and straining to hear. But whatever the sound, it remained elusive, uncertain. It might have been a voice, two voices, even three, or none.

Leaving the radio on, Lowell rose to go to the kitchen seeking fruit, but there was none.

He hesitated a moment, then took a prepared tray of synthetic food from the dispenser, deciding to eat it in Main Control.

The drones who had come ambling in, turned to follow.

Lowell walked into the room packed with communication equipment and sat down to eat and listen. Though he paid close attention, nothing but static came through. It got to him. In disgust, he rose. He was tired of sounds—the wrong kind of sounds—and tired of the food he'd picked from the dispenser.

With a sweep of his arm, he brushed it to the floor, and swung to the drones. "I've actually been eating this junk," he exclaimed. "Come on, let's go to the forest and get some real food."

Leaving the radio on, he lead the way toward the tunnel.

Entering the forest, followed by Huey and Dewey, he ran a hand over his stubbly face. "Need a shave and some sleep," he managed, trying to explain away the depression that dogged him.

But suddenly Lowell stopped in his tracks, signaling Huey and Dewey to do likewise. "Stop—don't move," he cautioned.

Something was wrong. He took several tentative cautious steps away from Huey and Dewey, listening carefully.

Forest noises could still be heard, along with the falling of water. Birds chirped and flapped their wings. Insects buzzed, but somehow everything was different. The noises were muffled as though the malaise that gripped Lowell might have been passed on to them and the other life of the forest.

Lowell became suddenly aware of deep trouble. He stared about him, almost in disbelief, at the once-beautiful, wildly colored flowers.

“They’re dying!” he exclaimed. “The colors are fading, their leaves stiffening and turning brown!”

He rushed to look more closely, expertly checking the wilting plants. A panic seized him. After all he’d gone through, to have the forest go this way!

He plunged his hand into the dirt and sifted it through his fingers. It told him nothing.

Lowell ran on into the garden, calling, “Dewey, follow me.”

All around him the fruits and vegetables lay dead or dying. Apples shriveled on their branches. Cantaloupes withered at his feet. Lowell surveyed the area with mounting despair.

Suddenly in a fit of anger he began tearing plants from the ground, throwing great chunks of earth skyward.

At last, exhausted, he rose to stagger back to his room. In front of him stood his microscope and other equipment. To his left and right, in wild disorder, lay specimens of plant life he had brought in. Some were well, some sickly.

Behind him, Huey and Dewey whirred quietly.

Lowell made some slides of his withering garden plants, working deftly, quickly, but with an eroding despair seeping through him.

He put a slide in place and bent to the eyepiece of the microscope. Magnified thousands of times, he saw many amoebalike organisms swimming on his field of vision. There was much extremely interesting and beautiful cellular activity.

Lowell studied the slide carefully, and that dirgelike drumbeat came again. There seemed to be nothing identifiable.

“Huey,” he said, without looking up, “go get me that gray book.”

Taking the book from Huey’s manipulator arm, Lowell quickly leafed through the pages until he came to the section he was looking for. Finally, he came to a section of the book with large color photographs.

Quickly he read the accompanying text, then rose to pace the room.

“I never—” He shook his head. “I just cannot figure out what’s wrong.”

He turned back to his lab desk and expertly prepared another slide from a segment of plant root. He clipped it under the microscope.

Once again the extreme magnification revealed the fascinating patterns of cellular activity.

Finally, Lowell pulled away from the microscope. Frowning and perplexed, he picked up the book and again began to read.

Hours later, his head dropped to his desk. He slept but the problem remained unsolved.

Lowell slept through the night, with Huey and Dewey standing by, their motors whirring quietly.

At length, he stirred, then awakened. It took a moment for him to remember, then it all came flooding back.

Lowell pushed the book he’d been studying the night before aside and rose to face the drones.

“ ’Morning, boys . . .” He shook the cobwebs from his head. “Huey,” he said, “go to the dome entrance and wait for further instructions.”

Huey turned to waddle from the room, his feet making that same squeaky noise along the floor.

“Dewey,” Lowell said, “go to the kitchen and bring me something to eat—anything. And bring it to me in Main Control.”

Dewey turned to follow Huey.

Lowell swung around and for the first time in days began to clean himself up.

At length, clean-shaven and in a fresh suit, he entered Main Control. Going to the radio he turned the volume up. Static again filled the room—the same as yesterday’s, crackly with only the faintest sound of what might have been human voices. It was impossible to tell. It irritated Lowell.

He walked out of Main Control into Drone Control, just off the big room.

Huey’s screen showed empty. Lowell sat down, frowning. He’d told him to await orders at Dome One entrance.

Then suddenly Huey’s image came on his screen.

It irritated Lowell, but he let it go by, as Dewey came in with his breakfast of a tube of coffee and several cookielike cubes.

Lowell took the tray and set it on the console, then gingerly tried the coffee. With a grimace he put it down, and turned to the microphone.

“All right, Huey, you can explain later where you’ve been. Now, I

want you to enter the dome and make a slow . . . complete . . . three-hundred-and-sixty-degree turn."

Huey's image on the screen complied.

"That's a boy . . . Now hold it . . . stop, right there."

Huey obeyed.

"That's good, now just . . . now take a sample there." Lowell paused a moment and said, "Dewey and I are coming to the dome. Wait right there!"

Before Lowell could turn from the screen, he saw again the desolation of the forest. Trees stood bare-branched and dying. On the ground, two small animals fought for a morsel of food.

Lowell sprang to his feet.

"C'mon Dewey," he said. "Looks like we're going to have to find something to feed them."

He led the way down to the cargo hold and to one of the cars. He put Dewey in, and slid behind the wheel.

Suddenly, on impulse, and with that same uptight feeling gnawing at him, Lowell jammed the throttle to the floorboard. They raced through the cargo hold and to the tunnel entrance.

With a wild screeching of tires, they shot into it, and there stood Huey!

"Huey!" Lowell slammed on his brakes, but it was too late.

The car plowed into the little bronze-colored drone, knocking the cap off his manipulator, and sending him tumbling backward to the floor.

Crackling fragments flew in every direction. His body continued to whir crazily.

"Huey!" Lowell leaped from his car. "I thought I told you to stay in the forest."

Huey gave a feeble bleep.

Lowell tenderly gathered the broken fragments of Huey's body into his arms. Weeping, he placed them in the car beside Dewey.

Dewey tried to help. Lowell, breathing heavily, pushed him aside. "Okay, Dewey, I got it. I got it." He deposited the little drone in the car.

"Maybe you'll rest a little easier." He got behind the wheel. "Now for a little ride."

It seemed ages to Lowell before they could get to surgery. But finally, he carried the shattered drone with all his pieces into the room and placed him on the operating table.

For a moment, while Lowell began collecting his tools, things

clicked into focus for him. He became acutely aware of his ship floundering through space, and of his buddies dead by his hand. Now, he'd crippled one of his two remaining "friends."

He brought a black bag with his tools back and stood beside Huey. He laid them on the side table, and a tight smile crossed his anxious face.

Had it all been worth it? He wondered: the killing of three men, and now smashing Huey. Did Earth really care? Would they even want the trees and plants? Wolf's words came back: "They don't care any more, Lowell."

But suddenly Lowell recalled his dying garden, depending on him and him alone for help.

He picked up a wrench and swung toward Huey. He collected the pieces of broken drone in a pile.

"It's okay, Huey," he said. "Hold steady—now."

Lowell soldered some pieces on and tightened some bolts.

To Dewey, helping, he said, "Hit that again—there! Now, let's look."

Huey tried to move, but only bleeped softly.

Lowell shook his head.

"Dewey," he said. "Go get me that L arm circuit wrench."

Lowell bent down to tighten a hidden burr.

Huey flinched. A part of his mechanism sagged against his tin body.

"I understand," Lowell said gently. He grasped a soldering iron and fastened some screws. He tightened more bolts, the wrench making a whirring noise that filled the little room.

At length, he stepped back.

"Try your arm, Huey. Try it, hard."

Huey tried, but his manipulator arm dangled beside him. He could not raise it effectively.

Lowell looked at him. "I'm sorry, Huey," he managed. "But that's the best that I can do."

He began to put his tools away, then turned to the little green drone. "I tried, but that's all I can do for him, Dewey."

He turned again to Huey, and made another adjustment.

"Now, Huey, try again." But it was no better.

"Now, it's just not, just not working," Lowell sighed. "Just not able to grasp anything, or rise."

Dewey's bleep was deep and concerned.

"Again, Huey?" Lowell asked. "If it works this time . . ." The arm still would not come up. Lowell shook his head in sorrow.

“I have tried . . . everything.” His voice dropped to a whisper of despair. “Everything, and I just don’t know what the trouble is!”

For moments, there was dead silence, while the *Valley Forge* slipped on and on.

Huey just stood there, whirring crazily.

Dewey hadn’t moved, but his motor idled smoothly.

Lowell sat on the edge of the operating table wiping the sweat from his drawn face and staring straight ahead.

At length he said, “Why don’t you guys just stay here? Dewey, you keep Huey company.”

Lowell walked from the surgery and down the corridor to his room, then flopped on his bed.

TEN

Whirling through space, Lowell was hardly aware of moving. He wakened, grubby and tired, with the memory of his failure with Huey bitter in his mind. He glanced down at his wrinkled clothes and passed a quick hand over his unshaven face.

"Huey, Dewey!" He nodded to them, standing close by his cot, and realized they must have come from surgery during the night.

Dewey was whirring normally, but Huey wasn't doing so well.

"Dewey," Lowell said, "you run your normal maintenance checks today. "Huey," he added gently, "you stay with me."

Dewey whirred and hesitated a moment, then trundled off to work.

Lowell led the way to the kitchen with Huey following as best he could. Lowell pushed open the door.

"Wow!" The kitchen was a mess of food trays, wrappers, and garbage.

Lowell snacked from a cold tray, standing up, for there was no place to sit down. Huey just looked on.

"Now," Lowell slammed down his tray, "we'll hit Main Control."

Stepping through the debris, he led the way to the communications center of *Valley Forge.* With Huey trailing, he pushed into the room filled with communications instruments. He sat before the radio listening intently, tuning it for clarity, but nothing came over but wild static.

Restlessly, Lowell rose to seek his own room once more.

He tried to work at his desk, but it was no use.

He sat staring at the wall, then at Huey.

"I don't know . . ." he said to the drone. "The radio isn't working and neither are you."

Acutely aware of *Valley Forge's* impotent, mighty bulk plunging through space, and of his own failures, Lowell barged from the room to wander aimlessly over the spacecraft. Huey followed.

Lowell raised his eyes. There lay the sun. He could picture the ship passing before it.

"Come on, Huey," he said. "Let's go to the forest."

Once there, Lowell stooped to powder a dead leaf in his hand. He reached to brush a withering flower.

“Dying, the trees, the plants, all are dying!” Lowell murmured.

Lowell fled to his room, with Huey scarcely able to keep up with him. He snatched a book at random from his case. He lay back on his cot staring upward unseeing at the open pages, while his mind reviewed the state of the ship.

“Kitchen’s a mess,” he murmured. “Main Control’s nothing but static. Cargo hold’s silent, silent. My forest’s clean but going. It’s dying.”

Lowell’s head dropped forward and he slept. Huey stood by, whirring in a stuttering rhythm.

In Main Control, though Lowell could not hear it, the radio crackled to life.

Suddenly a very distant voice—Neal’s voice—queried:

“ ‘VALLEY FORGE’ . . . ‘VALLEY FORGE’ . . . ‘VALLEY FORGE’ . . . COME IN, ‘VALLEY FORGE.’ THIS IS ‘BERKSHIRE’ TO ‘VALLEY FORGE’ . . . DO YOU READ ME . . . ?”

But there was no one in the room to read him . . . Lowell slept on in his own room, an open book spilled on the floor beside his cot.

Valley Forge swept on, but Lowell did not heed. The great ship swirled through a sea of stars, its great flag, once so clean and bright, now barely distinguishable.

The lone Dome One stood out against the starry sky. Around it lay the scarred empty cradles of the five severed nodes that had held the domes carrying his beautiful forests.

Out across the hull of mighty *Valley Forge* something could be seen passing in front of the sun.

Lowell still slept.

But suddenly the hiss of the P.A. system engulfed the ship. Again it was Neal pleading:

“ ‘VALLEY FORGE’ . . . COME IN, ‘VALLEY FORGE.’ THIS IS ‘BERKSHIRE,’ CAN YOU READ ME, ‘VALLEY FORGE’ . . . ?”

Lowell opened his eyes, startled. Neal’s voice . . . ? How was that possible? How had he tracked him down?

Neal’s voice continued:

“LOWELL, ARE YOU ALL RIGHT? GOT A SPOT ON YOU, LOWELL. FANTASTIC! WE’RE LOOKING FORWARD TO SEEING YOU, BUDDY . . . YOU BEAT IT . . . ! YOU PASSED THROUGH SATURN’S RINGS!”

Lowell was stunned. He leaped from his bed and dashed from the room. His mind whirled with the past—the past, and now here was Neal on the *Berkshire,* riding orbit somewhere. He’d never expected to see them again.

Lowell ran toward Main Control, with unidentifiable excited voices in the background catching up with him.

Then it was Neal again, impatiently pleading:

"NOW, TRANSMIT, WILL YUH? PLEASE ACKNOWLEDGE, IMMEDIATELY. COME IN 'VALLEY FORGE.' . . . CAN YOU READ ME . . . ?" There followed a long pause, then Neal again: **"PLEASE TRANSMIT IMMEDIATELY. 'BERKSHIRE' TO 'VALLEY FORGE.' . . . 'BERKSHIRE' TO 'VALLEY FORGE.' HOW ABOUT A WORD, LOWELL, HUH?"**

Suddenly there was Anderson's voice, full of the usual Anderson bogus cheeriness:

"LOWELL . . . ! HA! HA! I'M MIGHTY GLAD TO SEE YOU, BOY!"

Lowell stood over the radio, incredulously. He clicked on the mike, his mind racing, while the whole recent past crashed in upon him: Wolf's death and his body buried in Dome One. Keenan's and Barker's blowing up in Dome Two to be explained. Worse, Neal was back. Neal who had been up in space so long that all he wanted was to go home, to obey orders. Dome One with its forest would be blown up. It would be the end of his beloved garden, the end of his dream for Earth.

Finally, Lowell managed to speak: "Who, who is this?"

"THIS IS ANDERSON, LOWELL. MY GOD, WE'VE LOOKED HIGH AND LOW FOR YOU, BOY."

Lowell could hardly speak. His voice came weakly, almost in a whisper: "How did you find me . . . why did you even try?"

Anderson's chuckle crackled in:

"HEY! YOU MUST BE KIDDING, WE COULDN'T LET YOU GO WITHOUT AT LEAST TRYING TO FIND YOU. WE SAID WE'D SEND OUT A SEARCH PARTY."

Lowell swallowed, and managed some intelligible sounds. All the time, his mind kept saying, "They'll cock and blow it. They'll blow Dome One."

Anderson's voice went on and on:

"IT WASN'T EASY FINDING YOU, EITHER. EVEN WITH OUR DEEP SPACE TRACK."

Lowell murmured, "Guess not . . ."

Then Anderson's voice came in with authority: **"FREEMAN!"** His voice was flat, final. **"WE'LL HAVE TO FIND SOME WAY TO JETTISON THE DOME!"**

Lowell gulped.

Anderson plowed on:

"AND IT'S AWFULLY DARK OUT HERE, YOU'RE SO FAR FROM THE SUN . . ."

Suddenly Lowell's head jerked up. It was dark. *Valley Forge* was dark. Dome one was dark, with no sunshine!

Then it hit him. He leaped to his feet.

"The sun—! That's what it is—the sun! Did you hear what he just said? It's being so far from the sun! That's why my forest is dying."

"WHAT . . . ?"

Anderson's voice came flatly.

Lowell at a loss for a moment, finally said, "Aah, nothing. I was just saying that, that . . . everything is all right."

Anderson took a new tack:

"SAY, WHERE WAS YOUR BIG EXPLOSION, THE ONE REPORTED TO US BEFORE WE LOST CONTROL, BEFORE YOU WENT THROUGH SATURN'S RINGS?"

"Oh, the explosion. On the other side of the ship."

"THE OTHER SIDE . . ." Anderson came back. **"WE'LL BE INSTRUMENT DOCKING AT YOUR PORT SIDE IN ABOUT SIX HOURS . . ."**

The word "docking" hit Lowell like the blow of a fist, swinging him around. "Six hours!" Lowell exclaimed. "Huey, Dewey, c'mon. We can still save the forest."

He barged toward the corridor, wondering why he hadn't thought of the forest dying for lack of sunshine. And it had to be Anderson who had pointed it out.

ELEVEN

With Anderson's "Six hours, six hours," beating at his brain, Lowell led the way from Main Control to the immense cargo hold below. With Huey and Dewey trailing him, he raced to inspect row on row of stacked cargo modules, looking for the right ones. At length, he paused before a group of strange angular-shaped crates or modules.

"Here they are, Dewey," he said. "Give me a hand." Lowell began breaking open the modules that had stenciled on their sides:

(20) HIGH INTENSITY SOLAR LAMPS AND STANDS

Lowell ripped open module after module and started to remove the contents. Inspecting them, he could see that the solar energy devices resembled very small compact light sources. At length all of the modules lay opened.

"Now to get them to the forest," Lowell declared. Swinging around, his eyes lighted on the three cargo vehicles. He ran to one and drove it back to where the modules stood.

"Dewey," he ordered, slipping from behind the wheel, "start loading all the agricultural cargo onto the other cars."

Dewey's engine whirred. He waddled across to select a car and began to load it.

Lowell got behind the wheel of his car and edged it closer to the modules containing solar lamps.

"Boy, oh boy!" he exclaimed and, leaping from the car, began piling solar lamps on his vehicle. "Okay," he said at last, "let's go, Huey. Dewey, you keep on loading the other modules on the cars."

With Huey beside him, Lowell drove swiftly from the cargo hold, through the tunnel, and into the dying forest.

"Wait, wait!" He couldn't help calling to the dying trees. Leaping from the car he began stringing solar lamps around. He put them in his garden, among the vegetables, and ferns, and bushes, and along pathways leading into his beloved trees.

The forest looked terribly drab and deathly.

Lowell swiftly began stringing solar devices together, hooking them up to a master power source in the dome. This done, he went to help Dewey, and together, with Huey looking on, they drove load after load of cargo to the far end of the dome. Here they piled them

according to their labels. Hundreds of modules stood stacked there for later use.

Suddenly, all was in readiness.

Lowell walked over to a switch and looked around him. For the moment, all thought of Neal and the *Berkshire* had been crowded from his mind. Now, he could only think of his forest being saved . . . saved if he, Lowell, could save it.

"Okay?" He looked skyward to a towering spruce wilting, its branches browning, its trunk shriveled, and scaly.

Huey's engine whirred. Dewey's motor idled evenly.

"Now!" Lowell exclaimed. His hand flipped the switch, activating the power source that threw on all the solar energy sources.

Suddenly, the forest burst with light. It became illuminated with a brilliant warmth. Birds, animals . . . even insects . . . seemed to react to the light.

Lowell forgot about "Six hours" and *Berkshire.*

He turned to Huey and Dewey.

"How about that!" he shouted. "It's going to work!"

Lowell's eyes deepened with thought.

"And if it does . . . ?" something within him asked. "What then?"

"Yeah, what then?" Lowell repeated, while the ugly future seemed to spread out like a printed page before him.

But the forest, reviving under the lights, again crowded out all thought of Anderson, Neal, and the *Berkshire.*

He turned to Dewey and Huey and together they ambled into the deep forest, with the lights shining about them.

Lowell touched a tree trunk, already warmed, already responding. He knelt to touch a flower, now withered, that would spread its petals and bloom once more.

At length, they came back to the cars, and Lowell also came back to reality.

He led them to a grassy bank and sat down cross-legged with a drone standing to his right and left.

"Dewey!" Lowell sighed. "I've taught you everything that I know about taking care of the forest here." Lowell paused to look around him, then went on, "And—that's all that you have to do from now on."

Dewey bleeped softly, and nodded.

Lowell went on, his voice husky with emotion: "That's all, just—maintain the forest." He flung an arm out. "Now, these lights here will do the job that the sun does. They provide everything. I—" Lowell's

lips trembled. “I just can’t do it anymore. You see . . . things are . . . things just haven’t . . . worked out for me.”

Lowell paused a long time. His hand moved gently to touch Dewey’s metal shoulder. He fought for control. Finally, in a hoarse whisper, he said, “Take care of yourself, Dewey!”

For a long time Lowell sat in the forest. Birds sang in the trees. Rabbits hopped across the grass. A falcon lighted on his arm, its clean symmetrical brown and white wings folding against its body. Lowell stroked its neck. It pecked his arm, then flew away.

Finally, Lowell turned to the little bronze-colored drone.

“Huey,” he said gently, “you’ll have to come with me, because you . . . you’re just not working well enough to help Dewey.”

Suddenly Neal’s voice came, stridently seeking Lowell out:

“BERKSHIRE TO VALLEY FORGE . . . ! BERKSHIRE TO VALLEY FORGE . . . ! WE’LL BE DOCKING ON YOUR PORT SIDE IN TWO HOURS. STAND BY FOR UPDATES.”

For a moment, Lowell couldn’t move. “Two hours,” drummed through his mind. “Two hours until Neal will come and blow up Dome One.”

Suddenly, Lowell turned to his car. It had come. The thing that he had known would come was here.

“Huey,” he said gently, “come with me.”

Huey climbed in.

Lowell got behind the wheel. For a long moment he let his eyes stray through the woods, then came back to Dewey. His hands tightened on the wheel. “So long, Dewey,” he said, hoarsely. “Take care of yourself . . . and your forest.”

Dewey stood quietly, his motor whirring rhythmically. A soft sound came from him. His manipulator arm moved up then down.

Lowell drove away, through the tunnel, and to the detonator area. Entering the room, he walked to the control panel and pulled out the last remaining squib case. His hand trembled as he pushed a button and a panel in the console slid back.

A red light began to wink.

Tight-lipped, Lowell placed each squib in the appropriate aperture and locked it into place.

This done, he armed each one.

Now, the remote button on the control panel also began to wink.

Lowell sat down in his chair and faced Huey, who stood quietly beside him.

“Huey,” Lowell’s eyes darkened with emotion, “I kept you with me . . . because there’s no place left for us to go, buddy . . . no place in space or on Earth.”

A bitter laugh escaped his tight lips, then there was silence—silence such as space could produce, total, infinite, everlasting.

Lowell stared at the button. A button that would lift Dome One and Dewey from *Valley Forge* and send them winging into orbit, until . . . Lowell smiled, until Earth's voice would call out, "Come back! Replant us . . . make us healthy and beautiful once more!"

"If the time ever comes," Lowell whispered. "If ever . . ."

He raised his hand. It crept toward the button, then paused.

All at once from Main Control came static, then Neal's voice:

"BERKSHIRE TO VALLEY FORGE . . ."

Neal was pushing, wanting to connect, to dock soon . . .

"No!" Lowell said. His finger pushed the button.

Sparks flew as the node detonated. With a swift gliding motion Dome One severed from its base and rose skyward.

The verniers fired, streaming blue-white gas into space. The dome began to accelerate.

Lowell watched, fascinated. He brushed a hand across his eyes, as though to wipe away the vision of Dewey standing in Dome One. The ground beneath him would be trembling. In the forest, birds and animals around him would be chattering. Dewey would be whirring and clicking.

Lowell paused a moment, then led the way to the kitchen. It seemed as though he waited for something to happen. Something that he'd known would have to happen from the moment Neal's voice had come back from infinite space and searched out *Valley Forge.*

A sad smile crossed Lowell's lips. He walked to the window and looked out. Amidst the stars he sorted out Dome One, rapidly receding now, hurtling toward the reaches of uncharted space, waiting for Earth to say "Come back!"

Huey waddled over to stand beside Lowell. Framed in the window, they were two very lonely figures.

Lowell still waited . . . It would come. It must come. He had set the bombs . . .

Lowell walked back to sit cross-legged on the floor. Huey followed.

Lowell waited . . . He put a hand on Huey's shoulder. Huey bleeped.

"Huey," Lowell said softly, "when I was a kid, I once put a note with my name and address into a bottle and threw it into the ocean . . . I never did find out if anyone ever found it . . .

Suddenly, Lowell broke off, almost with a sigh.

Then it came, the thing he'd been expecting.

A blinding flash . . . ! A loud deafening boom . . . !

The ship *Valley Forge* exploded in a terrible light, bleaching out the sky, changing it to orange, to yellow, to a stark, unbearable white.

Way, way off, Dome One was a small, bright beacon.

Inside Dome One, Dewey moved about, watering a plant here, tending a fern there. Around him birds sang, frogs croaked.

All at once, almost ironically, from *Berkshire* came lovely music, a soft compelling song of children in the sun, on the earth:

"Fields of children running wild
In the sun.
Like a forest is your child growing
wild
In the sun."

Dewey went on working. He suddenly paused, then leaned to examine a rose that had bloomed to full, brilliant, dazzling maturity. The song went on:

"Doomed in his innocence
In the sun.
Gather your children to your side
In the sun.
Tell them all they love will die
Tell them why
In the sun.
Tell them it's not too late
Cultivate
One by one."

Again came a silence as it had to Lowell in that other time when he had stood in his garden listening . . .

The song concluded:

"Tell them to harvest and rejoice
In the sun."